

*“Wamwarĩ or Nyakĩnyua?”* Understanding Consecrated Life as  
African Marriage in the Light of Inculturation

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## Abstract

This study explores three important areas in relation to the inculturation of religious life in Kenya: (i) the way congregations of Catholic women religious integrate aspects of African Tradition Religion (ATR) into their profession rites; (ii) the perception and the use of the term “bride of Christ” (bridal metaphor) in the church and among religious women; and (iii) the way ordinary people conceive of consecrated persons in Kenya who have integrated some African religious rituals into religious life, in particular, the rites of religious profession. It arose from the author’s experience of the need to make consecrated life relevant and more comprehensible to people of Kenya. It focused on two indigenous communities: The Sisters of Emmanuel (Murang’a Diocese) and the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi. Semi-structured interviews formed the key methodological technique of data collection. Twenty one religious women (eighteen from indigenous congregations and three from international congregations) were interviewed and four sets of recorded videos were analysed. In addition, the author has personally observed at least six profession ceremonies. There were three major findings. 1. Traditional matrimonial rituals have been integrated into the profession rite so as to foster understanding of the concepts that underlie consecrated life, of which the majority of ordinary Kenyans have little understanding. However, this integration has not led to consecrated women being considered as married persons, but rather as unmarried and barren, people who have escaped from the greater responsibilities of married life. 2. Kenyan religious women have been content with the use of the bridal metaphor which empowers them in their lives and ministries, despite its drawback with respect to non-religious people. 3. Most ordinary Kenyans have little understanding of what consecrated life entails and view it as a wasted life. This study has attempted to resolve the misunderstanding that most ordinary Kenyans have about religious life by interpreting the traditional matrimonial rituals, deeply and thoroughly, by highlighting the possible causes of the misunderstandings, and by giving recommendations. These include: change of European dress (habit) to African dress; change of the lifestyle in order to guard against living beyond the economic standards of their people; and adjustments in the church’s liturgy in order to allow a religious woman with adequate knowledge of the African tradition to teach about religious life prior to the profession rite. The study has concluded that further inculturation is needed, since it is partial at present; that is, every aspect of consecrated life needs to be inculturated for it to be comprehensible to the ordinary people and to the religious women themselves for effective evangelization. In the light of inculturation, the study has therefore concluded that religious women in Kenya should be understood as *Nyakinyua*, married women and Co-creators/Moulders, for they too are givers of life through their life-enhancing ministries.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the religious women in Kenya as they endeavour to inculturate religious life.

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## Introduction

### 1.1 The Setting

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the whole of religious life as a consecration to God is based on the three vows of chastity (Mt. 19:12), poverty (Lk 9:58), and obedience (Lk 22:27; Jn 13:13-15). According to the Code of Canon Law, consecrated life is a stable form of living that is totally dedicated God.<sup>1</sup> In Africa, south of the Sahara, and in Kenya in particular, the effort to live this consecration to God within an African social-cultural context is paramount. African religious women witness by living their evangelical counsels of chastity or celibacy, poverty, and obedience by modelling their lives after the life of Christ their spouse.

In order to identify themselves with the customs of the local people whom they serve, various religious congregations in Kenya inculturate different aspects of religious life. According to Lumbala, one of the most inculturated aspects of religious life is the consecration of a religious sister.<sup>2</sup> Most prominently, traditional marriage rites are integrated into the women's profession ceremonies to denote that the religious woman taking vows is now married to Christ. While this is true, the terms or phrases used by ordinary people to refer to religious women do not reflect the same understanding. Since most of the African congregations integrate and continue to integrate the marriage rites into their profession rites, it seems apparent that they should work towards integrating fully all the stages of the traditional marriage into religious life and not just the profession rites. Inculturation is therefore central in making consecrated life more rooted and grounded in African values, so that it becomes a way of life that is authentically African.

### 1.2 Study Question

With my interest in the inculturation of consecrated life in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Kenya, I will explore the extent to which the local congregations are inculturating various aspects of religious life, especially the profession rites. I will also assess the use of the bridal metaphor among Kenyan religious women and how the ordinary people perceive consecrated life. Through my observation and my experience as a religious woman

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<sup>1</sup>Can. 573. ¶ 1. Code of Canon Law 1983, accessed February 10, 2015, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_PIY.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_PIY.HTM).

<sup>2</sup>Francois Kabasele Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 96.



in a local congregation in Kenya, I suspect that most ordinary people in Kenya do not fully understand what consecrated life entails. This is clearly shown by the types of questions that they (ordinary people) continually pose to religious women regarding procreation, their constant reminders that religious women have escaped from greater responsibility, and the continual use of such terms as *Wamwarĩ* (unmarried) among the Agĩkũyũ and *Nyar Kopere* (sisters to the priests) among the Luo communities of Kenya to refer to religious women. Given that the cultural milieu in sub-Saharan Africa still values and cherishes procreation and perpetuation of one's lineage, choosing celibate life is still seen as an enormous loss for the continuity of the family. Hence, religious women in Kenya have to keep answering questions pertaining to procreation. The reasons a woman would renounce physical motherhood are not clear to the people of Kenya since they attribute high value to physical fruitfulness. In this context it is considered a great misfortune not to have children. Children are the centre of African culture.<sup>3</sup> To die childless is to "lose a place in the constellation of the honoured ancestors."<sup>4</sup> In the case of barrenness or childlessness the traditional African culture devised various types of marriages such as woman to woman, ghost marriages, and levirate marriages to ensure that everyone in the society had progeny.<sup>5</sup> These forms of marriage still exist

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<sup>3</sup>Gerard Nwagwu, "Religious Vows in Traditional African Context," *African Ecclesial Review* 50 (2008): 139, explains the importance of children in the African context as follows: "In traditional African society, children are great treasure to their parents. This is because once they have attained responsible positions in life and in society, they have a natural obligation to look after and provide for their aged parents, relatives, older and younger siblings. There is no other viable provision for old age, ill health or incapacitation in Africa other than one's own children, grandchildren and the extended family."

<sup>4</sup>J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi, Kenya: Longman, 1989), 84.

<sup>5</sup>Judith Mbula Bahemuka, "Social Changes and Women's Attitudes Toward Marriage in East Africa," in *The Will To Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Oduyoye and R.A Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1987), 121-122, explains this forms of marriage as follows: "Woman to woman marriage also called social marriage is between two women and it is for procreation purposes. The woman who marries is herself legally married; is either barren or has given birth only to daughters. After consultation between herself and her husband, the two would chose a girl whom they want to incorporate in their family. The woman, in her husband's presence, or in the presence of one of the clan elders, designates or mentions the name of the girl to be the wife of her son who is never born. The woman looks for a genitor either a nephew or a close male relative. This arrangement ensures that the son who was never born got children. Ghost marriages were the social intervention if a young man died before getting married. To avoid discontinuity of his name, the family of the clan got a wife in the name of the deceased. The genitor was a close relative. The children born to her assumed the dead man's name. In Levirate marriages, the widow bears children from a relative of her dead husband. The children belonged to the dead

today.<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that the “marriage” of the sisters to Christ is another form of proxy marriage. The children that they beget are spiritual ones being born to the church in Christ. Thus, unless consecrated life is fully inculturated, ordinary people will continue to ask endless questions and will keep reminding religious women that they have escaped from the greater responsibility of marriage, procreation, and child rearing. The inculturation of consecrated life, especially the profession rites, which are modelled on traditional marriage, are designed to help foster a deep understanding of religious life as a form of marriage in the Kenyan context. This thesis is therefore an attempt to investigate the extent to which consecrated life is being inculturated in Kenya, particularly within the local congregations. I hope that the results of this study will shed light on the perceptions outlined above and on other challenges. This study thus, hopes to contribute towards a deeper understanding of consecrated life in Kenya and hence make it authentically African. Finally, depending on how the Kenyan religious women feel about the marriage metaphor, this study may also help to initiate a debate on whether a different model would be more beneficial.

#### Research Questions:

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are the consecrated women in Kenya integrating aspects of ATR in their religious profession?
2. Do the Kenyan consecrated women find the marriage model/bride of Christ metaphor as being operative in their lives and ministries?
3. How do the ordinary people perceive consecrated life in Kenya?

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husband.” See also Laurent Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 136.

<sup>6</sup>For example, Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi and William E. O’Brien, “Revisiting ‘Woman-Woman Marriage’: Notes on Gikuyu Women,” *NWSA Journal* 12 (2000):1-23, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316706>. ; Ambrose Ochuka Abongo “Validity of Woman to Woman Customary Marriages in Kenya Today,” accessed January 28, 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/9387755/validity\\_or\\_woman\\_customary\\_marriage\\_in\\_kenya\\_today](https://www.academia.edu/9387755/validity_or_woman_customary_marriage_in_kenya_today) ; Regine Smith Oboler, “Is the Female Husband a Man? Woman/Woman Marriage among the Nandi of Kenya,” *Ethnology* 19 (January 1980): 69-88, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3773320>. However, these marriages face opposition from the Catholic Church. For instance, Njambi observes the stand of the Kenyan Catholic Bishops on the baptismal guidelines of 1991: “In regard to this traditional practice [women who marry women], the first step is to insist that this arrangement be given up completely and that meantime [sic] all those involved, plus any other persons directly responsible for the arrangement, be denied the sacraments. After the women have separated completely, each one will be helped separately and any infants will be baptised.”

## Hypothesis

Indigenous African women's religious congregations in Kenya integrate various aspects of traditional matrimonial rituals into their religious profession ceremonies, in order to help the local people understand the concepts that define religious life, which most Kenyans have little understanding. However, the integration of traditional matrimonial rituals in the profession rites does not necessarily lead to proper understanding of religious women as married people, because even after the performance of these rituals, ordinary people still refer to them as unmarried.

## Definition of terms:

Words and terms used in this study are to be understood as follows:

**Inculturation:** Refers to the “incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the cultures, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about ‘a new creation.’”<sup>7</sup>

**Enculturation** is an anthropological concept and it means the process through which a person is introduced to the culture of his or her own society.<sup>8</sup>

**Consecrated life or religious life:** Refers to a way of life or institution of living a common life by members of the same community of Catholic women. It is also called a congregation, a religious institute or order where members live under vows of chastity (celibacy), poverty, and obedience.

**The first profession:** Refers to the incorporation of the novices or candidates who have been training, learning the principles of the congregation in the congregation through the making of temporary vows. They study the Rule, the Constitution, the Directory, and the Charism of the Congregation.

**The final profession:** Refers to the incorporation of the religious women with temporary vows permanently into the congregation, hence becoming full members with all rights and responsibilities.

**ATR:** African Traditional Religion(s) (ATR) refers to the faith of indigenous African people. It encompasses ancestral and cultural traditions, history, personal faith, and religious

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<sup>7</sup>Pedro Arrupe, “Letter to the Whole Society,” *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits* 7 (1978): 1-9. Quoted in Carl F. Starkloff, *A Theology of the In-Between: The Value of Syncretic Process* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2002), 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> For further details see Shorter, *Theology of Inculturation*. 5-6.

experiences, transmitted orally from one generation to the next by the forebears of the present generation.<sup>9</sup> It is a way of life that permeates all spheres of everyday life and as Mbiti has noted, “ATR is not written on paper but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings ... beliefs and actions cannot be separated; they belong to a single whole.”<sup>10</sup>

Africa: Refers to the part of Africa South of the Sahara, as the North is predominantly Islamic.

Ritual: Refers to the way in which [people] structure and interpret [their] world.<sup>11</sup> Or as a “social process which has the potential for communicating, creating, criticizing and even transforming meaning.”<sup>12</sup>

Agĩkũyũ or Kikuyu<sup>13</sup>: Are one of the three thousand ethnic groups of Africa. They are the largest ethnic group in Kenya. They live in Central Province of Kenya, East Africa, their ancestral land of heritage. At present they live in different parts in Kenya. Both words (Agĩkũyũ and Kikuyu) will be used interchangeably in this study.

Mũgĩkũyũ: (Singular) refers to a person belonging to the Agĩkũyũ ethnic community.

Wamwarĩ: Refers to the Agĩkũyũ name for unmarried woman.

Nyakĩnyua: Refers to the Agĩkũyũ name for a married woman.

Ordinary people: Refers to the non-religious Catholics and non-Catholics.

#### Personal Experience

The following is a personal account of the researcher’s experience with the ordinary people that inspired this inquiry. I am a Roman Catholic nun and a member of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi (ASN), Kenya. To qualify to become a nun in the Catholic Church, one has to go through several stages during the training process commonly known as first and perpetual profession. During the pre-novitiate or postulancy, over a period of a year,

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<sup>9</sup>Omosade Awolalu, “Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976): 275, accessed on February 20, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1462340>.

<sup>10</sup>John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 3.

<sup>11</sup>Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 267.

<sup>12</sup>Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Lane Dermot, eds., “Ritual”, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 907.

<sup>13</sup> Kikuyu can refer to either the language or the people. The Agĩkũyũ refers to the people. Gĩkũyũ refers to the language, to the country or as an adjective to denote the ethnic group. The official term that is used nationally and internationally is “Kikuyu.” In this study the words Kikuyu and Agĩkũyũ will be used interchangeably to mean the people while Gĩkũyũ will be used to mean the language.

I was socialized and helped to deepen my Christian faith and was taught the practice of rising and retiring in common, the practice of silence, prayer, and matters concerning the liturgy. Training during this stage helped me to be accommodating and develop the ability to live with others peacefully.

After the first stage, I graduated into the next stage called the novitiate, which usually covers a period of two years. During this stage, I was taught the principles, rules, and regulations of the congregation and was initiated into the congregation by taking temporary vows. I was then allowed to leave the formation house and join the sisters in the communities. This stage helped me to deepen my call as a celibate and my relationship with others, for community living is paramount in living one's consecration according to the constitutions of the congregation. I was expected to practice what I learnt during the training once I was in the community. I was also required to renew my vows every year for six years. This is in accordance with the canon law that requires the time of temporary profession to be not less than three years and should not be longer than six years; where a Superior General<sup>14</sup> extends the temporary profession for a member, then it should not exceed nine years. During this time when I was in my temporary profession I was guided by my directress towards deepening my commitment and becoming aware of my congregational identity. The community experience was for me a school of peace, justice, and reconciliation as I endeavoured to live peacefully with members of different ethnic communities.

After undergoing this intensive preparation, I took my perpetual vows on August 15, 2009 in an elaborate, colourful celebration at Uzima Centre, Thika. A few days later, a mass of thanksgiving organized by members of my local church was also celebrated. The mass was comprised of highly structured and powerful Kikuyu traditional rituals, for example, a ritual called *gũtinia kĩande* (literally cutting or butchering the shoulder blade of roasted goat meat). This is a Kikuyu marriage ritual also known as *kũguraria*.<sup>15</sup> It is the highest ritual ceremony because it is an important symbol that culminates the wedding ceremony and seals the

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<sup>14</sup>A Superior General is a leader of an order or congregation.

<sup>15</sup>Amrik Heyer, "Gender and the Production of Ethnic Identity in Kikuyu-speaking Central Kenya," in *Violence and Belonging: The Quest for Identity in Post-colonial Africa*, ed. Vigdis, Broch-Due (London: Routledge, 2005), 58, explains the term *Kuguraria* as follows: "*Kuguraria* also *gurario* is the feast of thanksgiving by the clan of the groom for the clan of the bride for the gift of a daughter. The *gurario* initiates relationships between the two clans, which will last 'for the life time of the couple and beyond'. Its fruits include the bride wealth (cattle) paid to the bride's clan, and rights over the labour and fertility of the bride which will benefit the groom's clan. It also includes material gifts, which continue to pass between clans, and are symbolic of the principle of fertility and 'increase' embodied by the marriage."

marriage. It signifies the permanence of marriage. The husband does the ‘cutting of the shoulder blade meat as the wife holds it on one end. The public act of *gũtinia kĩande* seals the marriage and it is recognized as legal under the law.<sup>16</sup> The ritual of *kũguraria*, which usually accompanies the bride wealth, is also performed by the single Agĩkũyũ women to legitimise their status. According to Heyer, a single woman performs her own *gurario* and bride wealth ceremony by slaughtering a goat to her clan.<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, the relationship of the women and their clan was one of ‘bringers of wealth’. The bride wealth accompanied their marriage. Heyer notes that women can bring wealth to their clan without getting married since “in performing the *gurario*, the thanksgiving feast which accompanies the bride wealth, women affirm their role as daughters and ‘as bringers of wealth’ in their natal clans, thus legitimizing their single status.”<sup>18</sup> Heyer notes that, the phenomenon of single women performing the *gurario* or bride wealth ceremony has become institutionalised among certain groups. An example is a group called “Home Again”, formed by a group of Thika businesswomen.<sup>19</sup> According to Heyer, the Home Again group is comprised of wealthy businesswomen who make regular substantial contributions of money to finance their visits to each member’s natal homes. As with the traditional marriage ceremony, the Home Again women arrange for a feast for each woman’s clan when her turn is due. Her parents are then given money to provide for the expenses. In contrast to the traditional marriage ceremony where the bride wealth is given to the clan of the woman, in the Home Again group, it is the woman herself who keeps the bride wealth.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally, the bride wealth was meant to compensate for the loss of the labour and fertility to the woman’s clan. Home Again, as Heyer notes, is similarly a *gurario* for the woman’s clan in compensation her upbringing. Rather than being performed by the groom and his clan, the *gurario* is given by the woman herself and her contemporaries to whose group she now owes her allegiance. In that case, Heyer points out that the Home Again woman brings in children and contributes financially to her home so that neither her fertility nor her labour is lost to her clan.<sup>21</sup> In the Home Again ceremony, the fact that the woman herself keeps the majority of the bride wealth is an acknowledgement of

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<sup>16</sup>According to Neal W. Sobina, *Culture and Customs of Kenya* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 141. This is a customary law and is recognised as binding by the Kenyan government.

<sup>17</sup>Heyer, “Gender and Identity,” 51.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 52.

her independent agency in contributing her labour and fertility to her clan and to demonstrate her status as both insider and outsider of her natal clan within whose orbits, as a single mother she remains.<sup>22</sup>

When religious women undergo such a ritual, it does not mean that their marriage to Christ is recognized as legally binding, but it is a symbolic way of making the consecrated way of life feel at home with the local cultural practices, analogous to the Home Again practices. It is also a way that religious women identify with the people in their cultural practices. It symbolizes that religious women are now married to their spouse, Jesus. These rituals are used during marriage ceremonies to cement the couple's commitment. As a member of the Agĩkũyũ community, similar rituals were used during the mass to affirm that my vowed commitment to Christ was a form of marriage. This is well accepted in the lay culture, particularly the lay Catholics, as is shown by their active participation, but then they forget about the metaphor once the religious profession is over.

#### Perception of Consecrated Life

After going through this experience of being made a married woman through the traditional marriage rituals, I began to rethink and to question how ordinary people, the religious women themselves, and church leaders perceive consecrated life, and the status they accord to religious women. How do the ordinary people view consecrated women? What terms or names do they use to refer to them? Why do they use those terms? How do the religious women view themselves? For instance, among the Kikuyu the terms *Wamwarĩ* and *Nyakĩnyua* are used to refer to unmarried and married women, respectively; in reference to religious women the term *Wamwarĩ* is used whereas the term *Nyakĩnyua* is exclusively reserved for married women. Other terms like *Nyar Kopere* (literally, sisters to the priests) are used among the Luo community of Kenya, with *opere* meaning a priest, and hence 'sisters to the priests', while a married woman is referred to as *Min ot* which means mother. From the above experience, I deduced that these terms reflect a lack of proper understanding of what consecrated life is about and indicates a kind of disconnect between the marital symbolism of the consecration rites and the status of religious women in society and the church, where religious women are regarded as unmarried women.

Renunciation of physical motherhood seems not to be well understood by ordinary people in Kenya. In the Kikuyu traditional culture, like in many other cultures across Kenya, there was no concept of single life, for both men and women were expected to marry and

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 58.

have children. In fact, in many cultures there were no bachelors, unmarried women, or widows, for if a man died, levirate marriages were usually practised; that is, the wife was inherited by the brother of the deceased, so as to continue raising children for the deceased.<sup>23</sup>

Also, among the Bakiga people of Uganda, the single state of life was not popular, as

Banzikiza observes:

The single status has no deep-rooted tradition and is ridiculed among the people of Kabale who even doubt a person's sincere motives for preferring this life style to the normal one of marriage. They may conclude that something has gone wrong with such an individual and persuade him/her to get married. With regards to women, even if they attain economic independence and self-sufficiency, they are still expected to have legitimate husbands so that they can beget children ... Married men suspect unmarried women of having difficult characters and being selfish, while married women accuse them of being immoral and luring other women's husbands. Despite the social stigma attached to the single state, many young men and women in Kabale have adopted in the past this life style.<sup>24</sup>

Mugambi also notes that, those who did not marry were regarded as irresponsible and were not socially accepted. One of the marks of social adulthood was marriage, and no matter how old one was chronologically, a single person was not recognized as a grown up.<sup>25</sup> A man or a woman was therefore elevated to a respectable social status by being married and consequently fulfilling the responsibilities associated with marriage. More importantly, as Bahemuka has argued, Africans saw marriage and procreation as a unity, which attempted to recapture humanity's lost gift of immortality. For through marriage and procreation, the African became immortal, as the name was perpetuated through the generations.<sup>26</sup> Although the single lifestyle was not popular, Banzikiza notes that, among the Bakiga people of Western Uganda, there were cases of single people, like the *enteegwa* (girls set apart to serve the deities) who existed, and people believed that the girls were married to the deities they served, since marriage was the central element in this type of dedication.<sup>27</sup> On his part, Otene holds a different opinion regarding the claim that in the past among black Africans, there were people who lived celibate lives through their life-cycles in response to certain tribal needs. For him, "what did exist was a more or less protracted continence, practised for ritual

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<sup>23</sup>Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Nairobi, Kenya: East Africa Publishers, 2005), 67.

<sup>24</sup>Constance R. Banzikiza, *The Pastoral Approach to African Traditional Value of Fecundity and Marriage* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1995), 26-27.

<sup>25</sup>Mugambi, *The African Heritage*, 99.

<sup>26</sup>Bahemuka, "Social Changes and Women's Attitudes," 120.

<sup>27</sup>Banzikiza, *The Pastoral Approach*, 26.



motives or for others having to do with the life of the clan. This type of celibacy was for a time; it was not permanent.”<sup>28</sup> Otene further explains that, even though certain societies had very strict regulations on sexual relationships as in cases of adultery and prostitution, such practices did not lead to the type of celibacy in the perspective proposed in the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

Thus there seems to be a consensus that there is no indigenous context for the consecrated life in Kenya, and this most probably is the reason why the people might have a different understanding of consecrated life from the Catholic Church. Traditionally, communities in Kenya valued married life and marriage was seen as an institution that bound them together through intermarriage between different communities and clans. Although there has been a massive breakdown of traditional cultures in Kenya, the values and rituals that concern the institution of marriage persist among the people to the extent that some people consider marriage valid only if the concerned families fulfil certain rituals like paying of the bride price.<sup>30</sup> This is in spite of the catechism and the teachings of the church on marriage as a sacrament and a holy union between two individuals. In other words, before couples proceed to the church for the blessings most individuals first fulfil the requirements of their cultures.<sup>31</sup> In my view, these examples demonstrate a clear lack of understanding of consecrated life. It illustrates a disconnect between the marital symbolism of the consecration of religious women and the way they are treated in the society as unmarried women.

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<sup>28</sup>Matungulu Otene, *Celibacy and the African Value of Fecundity* (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba publications, 1981), 7.

<sup>29</sup>Otene, *Celibacy*, 7. This is Gospel as traditionally constructed by the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>30</sup>The Congregations do not pay the bride price for the young women entering their congregations. This is ironic because Western congregations have historically required a dowry. However, Lawrence Njoroge, *A Century of Catholic Endeavour: Holy Ghost and Consolata Missions in Kenya* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 1999), 191-192 says that: “Some missionaries like the Consolata Fathers who had started indigenous institutions for African sisters honoured the customs of the Agĩkũyũ people by paying the bride price for each girl who left her home to join religious congregation. Other congregations like the Spiritans were adamant and did not honour such customs and this created a rift between the mission and the local people as many girls would leave their home for the convent without parental blessings.”

<sup>31</sup>For a detailed research on Christian marriage in Africa, see Benezeri Kisembo, Laurent Magesa and Alyward Shorter, *African Christian Marriage* (London: Chapman, 1977).

Most Kenyan congregations, integrate some traditional marriage<sup>32, 33</sup> practices into the religious profession ceremony. For example, the bride, who is understood to be the person taking the vow, is presented to the church by her parents for the service of the church and the people of God. Traditionally, this is a very significant gesture as society traditionally places emphasis on the bride as a gift. The most precious gift one family would give to another was the gift of a daughter, who would be a potential mother of their children; thus, the bride was handed over to her new husband by her parents or her relatives. In the handing-over element of the profession rite, the officiating priest invites the parents or relatives to express their agreement to let their daughter serve in the Church and to bless their daughter and pray for her. For instance, the priest may say, “Parents, have you accepted your daughter’s decision to serve in the church?” Another example of traditional ritual carried out during the consecration ceremony is performed by the parents of the girl. In this ritual, the parents especially the father asks his daughter if it is alright if he drinks the beer (traditionally-prepared beer in a gourd is served with a Kikuyu traditional horn that is commonly used during the marriage ceremonies). The daughter [sister] accepts by saying, “Father, drink the beer, I will not shame you.” Then she pours some beer into the horn and hands it to her father, who drinks and blesses his daughter. The father spits on his chest uttering blessings for his daughter. (Spitting on the chest is a traditional way of blessing according to Agikũyũ culture). The same ritual is repeated with the mother drinking the beer and blessing of her

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<sup>32</sup>Marriage according to ATR is a rite of passage and involves the transition of individuals from one social category to another. It involves a change of family and clan. It is a long gradual process, which is marked by a series of rituals; courtship, negotiations, betrothal, feasts, gift exchanges, and ritual observances. Wedding or/and wedding ceremony on the other hand is a one day event that mark the end of the long process of marriage preparations where through rituals the couple are recognised as husband and wife.

<sup>33</sup>The preparation of perpetual or final consecration of a religious can be compared to the long gradual process of marriage. For instance, the traditional marriage begins with the courtship period, where the prospective bride and bridegroom come to know each other. During this period, the families of both the prospective bride and bridegroom also begin to investigate the two to see if they have the qualities to be part of their families and clans. If they are found to be fitting, then the two families or clans proceed to the next stage. The initial stages of religious life can be compared to traditional courtship. The prospective sisters (aspirants) begin by visiting the sisters in their convent to establish a relationship. Once they identify a religious congregation and are ready to proceed, they request admission. The congregation, through the appointed sister in charge of vocations begins to make visits to aspirant’s home to get to know the family and learn more about her. If she is found fitting, then the two parties arrange for the next stage. The other stages of postulancy, novitiate, first profession, and final profession can also be compared to the stages of marriage.

daughter. These traditional practices, which are integrated into religious professions, are well accepted in the churches in Kenya.

Apart from the inculturation of religious profession, other areas where aspects of ATR are integrated into the religious life include community living, where religious women practice traditional values of welcoming, hospitality, and sharing. Vows are also being inculturated. For instance, the vow of poverty is reflected by values of sharing whatever they have with the needy of the community. Chastity or celibacy is shown by their service to all God's people. The vow of obedience is also modelled on the traditional way of respecting and obeying the elders. Prayers, the manner of formation of the candidates, and the lifestyle are other examples.

Similar rituals are carried out when a priest is ordained; these also depend on one's culture. For instance, a priest from the Agĩkũyũ community would be incorporated into the group of *athuri* (elders). In this ritual, the newly-ordained priest contacts his uncle or his friends and requests to be initiated into the role of elder. As with all the Agĩkũyũ ceremonies, this occasion is characterized by the ritual slaughter of a goat. The ceremony is further ritualized with aid of green potato vines, one of which is ceremoniously dropped to the ground to coincide with the respective prayer requests for an increase of children, of animals, of the virtues of love, peace, and unity, and of the increase of the fruits of the land. In the presence of friends, relatives, and community members, the newly ordained priest becomes a Kikuyu elder. He is henceforth recognized as a person equipped with special knowledge and skills, prepared to serve as a spiritual father to many, therefore rightly laying claim to offspring and thus ensuring his contribution to the enlargement and continuation of life.<sup>34</sup> In the Kalenjin community of Kenya, the ritual involves vesting the newly-ordained priest with traditional elder's skin, made from the *Culumbas* monkey. He is made to sit on a traditional ritual stool. Once seated, a flywhisk, a spear, a sword tied to his belt, and the elders' *finbo* (a ritual stick) are presented. In addition, a cap of honour made from an animal skin is placed on his head. These items are used to denote the user's eldership status. The elders carrying out the ritual then invoke traditional installation words and conclude with a traditional blessing. In the next step, the elderly women pay their homage by placing a thick beaded necklace

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<sup>34</sup> Harold Miller, 1998. "Kikuyu Elder-hood as African Oracle," accessed on November 5, 2015. <http://www.africafiles.org/searcharchives.asp>.

around his neck. They then kneel down led by the priest's mother or his aunt and give him *mursik* (milk which is fermented with traditional herbs).<sup>35</sup>

This study, then investigates the extent to which traditional rituals are being integrated into women's profession ceremonies. Special attention is given to the African traditional rites of marriage vis-à-vis religious profession rites in order to establish the extent to which traditional religious beliefs and practices influence and validate religious profession as a form of traditional marriage in the Kenyan context.

Consecrated women have, in the long tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, been referred to as "brides of Christ." Dyan Elliott has traced the history of the metaphor of the bride of Christ. Tertullian, a second century North African theologian, first used the metaphor to refer to consecrated virgins. Tertullian made use of the bridal image as a disciplinary strategy to control the freedom of the independent virgin. It was a way of subduing the virgins, who were not theoretically answerable to anyone. The use of the metaphor was therefore to subject the virgins to a male authority—Christ. Another reason why Tertullian invested the virgin with the title was to prevent the virgin's potential to undo gender, a condition that would have led human beings to live in angelic androgyny.<sup>36</sup> This study has also explored whether there is continuity in how the term is applied in both the African and non-African churches.

### 1.3 The Scope of the Study

The study has involved two indigenous congregations in Kenya, namely: the Sisters of Emmanuel from Murang'a diocese and the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi. Six religious women from each congregation were interviewed. It also included telephone conversations with nine religious women from other congregations, both indigenous and international.

### 1.4 Delimitations

The scope of this study did not cover all the cultural groups in Kenya. The study was primarily conducted among the religious congregations founded in Central Kenya, a place where majority of people are Kikuyu speaking. Further, the twenty one religious women who were interviewed came from six different ethnic groups: Luo, Kisii, Kamba, Luhya, Kalenjin

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<sup>35</sup> Fr. Joseph Korir, (not real name), telephone interview by Jemima Kiboro, February 20, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell: Metaphor and Embodiment in the Lives of Pious Women, 200-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

and Agũkũyũ. Kenya has over forty different cultural groups. The findings of this study are therefore dominated by one cultural group—the Agũkũyũ. Thus, I would want to point out that I have not studied intensely other cultural groups in Kenya to establish how they are inculturating religious life. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all Kenyan religious women.

### 1.5 Methodological Considerations

The research utilized a case study approach, which allowed me to use two indigenous African religious congregations in Kenya to illustrate how traditional religious rites were being incorporated into the religious profession rites, to assess how religious women perceived these rites as operative in their own lives, and to establish the ordinary people's perception of consecrated life. These religious congregations were the Sisters of Emmanuel from the diocese of Murang'a and the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi. Six religious women were interviewed from each congregation. In addition, telephone conversations with nine religious women from other congregations were included. The respondents were recruited through a snowball method. To collect ideas, thoughts and memories from the participants, I developed and used a semi-structured interview guide (see the text of the printed interview guide in Appendix D), which contained open-ended questions that guided the telephone interviews. This entailed having a few predetermined questions, which according to Walsh "is more likely to let the interview develop as a guided conversation according to the interest and wishes of the interviewee."<sup>37</sup>

According to Gilham, the semi-structured interview is the most important way of conducting research interviews because of its flexibility balanced by structure, and because the quality of the data obtained.<sup>38</sup> This method of data collection was suitable for this research, which focused on the religious women as it enabled them to feel free to speak about their personal experiences in living and the inculturation of religious life. It was also possible to "avoid too much pre-judgement where the questions weren't predetermined the researcher could obtain the interviewees 'real' views and 'beliefs'".<sup>39</sup> Another benefit of using semi-structured interviews was that it enabled me to build and explore the issues raised by

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<sup>37</sup>Mark Walsh, *Research Made Real: A Guide for Students* (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2001), 65.

<sup>38</sup>Bill Gillham, *Research Interviewing: A Range of techniques* (New York: Open University Press, 2005), 70.

<sup>39</sup>Walsh, *Research Made Real*, 66.

participants' responses, thus deepening the quality of the data obtained. This was vital as it enabled me to capture what Seidman has advised "to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study."<sup>40</sup> Again, this practice helped to set aside speculations about the topic by focusing on what Seidman has termed as the "participant's subjective experience."<sup>41</sup> All the interviews were digitally recorded with granted permission from the respondents. As Rubin and Rubin have advised, "Recording interviews on audiotape helps get the material down in an accurate and retrievable form. Tape keeps until you get a chance to transcribe them [...] some interviewees appreciate being recorded because they see the tape as a symbol of your ability to get their messages out accurately"<sup>42</sup> One of my interviewees was very excited when I requested her permission to record the conversation.

Reismann maintains that, "taping and transcribing are absolutely essential to narrative analysis".<sup>43</sup> During the process of data transcription, I presented participants' views in their own words without alteration. Further, an agreement to destroy the original data once it has been transcribed was reached between the researcher and the participants. The respondents were kept anonymous for confidentiality.

In total, twenty-one participants were interviewed. Seventeen of them were interviewed through telephone calls and four through the questionnaires sent via email. The questions were drafted in English, but the respondents were free to respond in their languages. Whenever necessary, the researcher translated the questions into the Gĩkũyũ or Swahili<sup>44</sup> languages. The aim of this translation was to make the questions clear, especially for the interviewees who requested more explanation.

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<sup>40</sup>Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006), 15.

<sup>41</sup>Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 85.

<sup>42</sup>Herbert Rubin, and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 126.

<sup>43</sup>Catherine K. Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), 56.

<sup>44</sup>Swahili is a national language alongside English in Kenya. It is also spoken in many parts of Africa. This is because the founding fathers of the united African Movement intended that Swahili be the unifying language of Africa in the postcolonial period.

## Participants' Demographic Data

Table 1. Interviewees according to the year of entry in religious congregation and number of years in that congregation

Name of Participants (not real names)	Year of Entry in Religious Life	Year of Temporary vows	Number of Years in the Congregation
Sr. Joan	1956	1959	59
Sr. Miriam	1961	1963	54
Sr. Faith	1961	1963	54
Sr. Mary Agnes	1978	1980	37
Sr. Risper	1978	1980	37
Sr. Jean	1980	1982	35
Sr. Violet	1989	1991	26
Sr. Ruth	1992	1994	23
Sr. Naomi	1993	1995	22
Sr. Immaculate	1993	1995	22
Sr. Dorothy	1997	1999	18
Sr. Doris	1998	2000	17
Sr. Evelyne	1998	2000	17
Sr. Hilda	1998	2000	17
Sr. Ann Kevin	1998	2000	17
Sr. Jane Rose	2000	2002	15
Sr. Annette	2002	2004	13
Sr. Rose John	2003	2005	12
Sr. Deborah	2008	2010	8
Sr. Lisa	2008	2010	8
Sr. Terry	2008	2010	8

I also thoroughly analysed four profession videos. Two were from indigenous congregations— Sisters of Emmanuel and Assumption Sisters of Nairobi and two from international congregations—Sisters of Mercy and Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Mother of God. As well, I used my own video taken during my final profession and my observation of at least six final profession ceremonies of sisters from the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi, in addition to written materials including the interview

transcripts. The emerging data were anticipated to show how religious life was being inculturated in Kenya and to indicate how Kenyan religious women perceive the rites as operative in their own lives, as well as to address the disconnect that exists between the profession rite and the status of the religious women in the church and in the society in the light of inculturation. In addition, any possible drawback to the marriage model in the lives of Kenyan religious women may be used as a springboard to initiate more debate on a more comprehensive status or model for religious women, hence a move towards making it more relevant to the Kenyan context.

### 1.6 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by insights from postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory investigates the effect and legacy of western invasion, occupation, subjugation, colonialism and control of the non-Western world. This theory is used to deconstruct, undercut, demolish, and challenge the ways of knowledge that have constructed the colonised people and alienated them from their cultures. It is a suitable framework for this work, which intends to establish how consecrated life can be understood as a form of traditional marriage in the light of inculturation.

Foundational scholars of postcolonial theory include: Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Frantz Fanon was an anti-colonial liberationist who concerned himself with the effects of colonialism upon the colonized. Born in Martinique, this Afro-French psychiatrist was involved in Algerian War of Independence. He has argued that colonial domination was used to convince the natives that colonialism was aimed at enlightening their darkness and in so doing, it ingrained deeply into the minds of the natives that before its coming, their history was dominated by savagery and tribal warfare and that if the colonialists were to leave the natives would revert into barbarism, degradation and bestiality.<sup>45</sup> He saw colonialism as presenting itself not as a gentle loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but one who constantly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from managing to commit suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts.<sup>46</sup>

In the end, what the colonial mother did, according to Fanon, was to “protect the child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology and its own unhappiness, which is its very

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<sup>45</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. C. Farrington (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1968), 211.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 211.



essence.”<sup>47</sup> Colonialism, argued Fanon, “is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country, it is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, distorts, disfigures and destroys it.”<sup>48</sup> By demeaning the past of the natives, colonialism made sure it created a cultural vacuum that was to be filled with European cultures. Language was the instrument used to suppress the native cultures, since to speak “means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”<sup>49</sup> Further, Fanon describes the brutality of colonialism towards the native cultures; he asserts, “Every colonised people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country.”<sup>50</sup> In this way he associated colonialism with the death and burial of the African cultures. This sentiment is echoed by Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his work, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, when he asserts:

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft, but the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them to see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people’s languages rather than their own.<sup>51</sup>

Fanon argued that, for the colonialists, the vast continent of Africa was a haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, and weighed down by the curse of God.<sup>52</sup> Fanon’s answer was to persuade Africans to recover their history and reassert their identity and culture. He insisted that “the native intellectual who decides to give battle to colonial lies, fights on the field of the whole continent. The past is given back its value and culture, extracted from the past would be displayed in all its

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 211.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 210.

<sup>49</sup>Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. C. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1967), 17-18.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>51</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986), 3.

<sup>52</sup>Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 211.

splendour...”.<sup>53</sup> In this regard, Fanon was advocating for the redemption of the past African culture. In the same line, Musa Dube, a present day Christian postcolonial critic from Botswana, has observed how the missionaries used language as a device to wipe out African culture. In her essay “Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating *Badimo* into ‘Demons’ in the Setswana Bible (Mathew 8.28-34; 15.22 10.8),” she relates how the death and burial of Setswana culture was championed through the colonization of their language such that it no longer served the interest of the original speakers. She observes how the missionaries translated *Badimo* into a demon. In contrast, “The word *Badimo*”, she says, literally means the ‘High ones’ or the ‘Ancestral Spirits’ in Setswana cultures.<sup>54</sup>

“The institution of *Badimo*”, states Dube, “serves as the centre of social memories and acts as a thread that connects the present society and families with their past and directs them to the future, for through it, the people of the past are kept alive and actively involved in the events of the present society.”<sup>55</sup> Translating the *Badimo* as demons, Dube argues, was a strategy to mark out the Setswana cultures as a “dangerous—devil and death zone” and to warn the people to distance themselves from *Badimo* the demons and identify themselves with Jesus the divine power.<sup>56</sup> She goes on to show the strategies that the members of the African Instituted Churches (AICs) use to resist this form of colonization. By reading the written Setswana language with the unwritten texts of Setswana from the memories of Botswana readers and hearers, and through the use of the African traditional method of divining through the bible, they are able to counter the colonizing strategy and reassert the Setswana culture.<sup>57</sup> Divination is a traditional way by which diviners read and interpret reality. Dube explains that, by the use of the divining set, the diviners are able to get in touch with *Badimo*. Once they are in touch, they are asked to reveal the problem, its causes, and the possible solutions and the overall objective is to maintain life.<sup>58</sup> Instead of using the traditional divining set, Dube explains that the AICs use the bible as the new divining set to read and interpret reality. They perceive the bible from their own cultural perspective as a book that diagnoses relationships and promotes the healing of relationships between people

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 211.

<sup>54</sup>Musa Dube, “Consuming a Colonial Bomb; Translating *Badimo* into ‘Demons’ in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8. 28-34; 15.22; 10.8.),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21 (1999): 39.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 55.

and the divine powers.<sup>59</sup> In their business of maintaining life, the AICs continue to draw from the Christian and African traditions. *Badimo* are resurrected from the colonial gravesite and, together with Jesus, are given their rightful places as divine powers that promote good relationships and health in communities where the bible is read.<sup>60</sup> Dube's essay is therefore a perfect example of countering colonialism and a way of affirming African traditional religion.

In her *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Dube sets out to read the bible with the women from African initiated churches (AICs). The AICs are churches across Africa that marched out of the colonial church as a protest against discrimination by the mission churches. Major characteristics of these churches include: a theology of the Spirit (*Moya*), healing, leadership, and prophecy which are practiced largely by women. Dube holds that: "It is the Spirit (*Moya*) that empowered them to reject the discriminatory leadership of missionary-founded churches and to begin their own churches."<sup>61</sup> Dube further affirms that, after the AICs rejected the discriminatory gospel, they took upon themselves the responsibility of interpreting the Bible from a *Semoya* perspective which is a mode of reading that resists discrimination and articulates a reading of healing: healing of race, gender relations, and healing of individuals, classes and nations.<sup>62</sup> According to Dube, the *Semoya* approach:

Exhibits the wisdom, the courage, and the creativity of integrating different religious faiths in the service of the life and difference. Historically born within imperial times, which proceeded by dispossessing people of their cultural and religious integrity through the promotion of Christianity as the universal religion, the AIC's subvert this imperial strategy. They reject the imposition of Christianity as the one and only valid religion and freely cull from both religious cultures, whatever wisdom these traditions offer in the enhancement of life and nurturing difference.<sup>63</sup>

By the use of *Moya* (Spirit), and how the way AICs women employed it to interpret the bible, Dube shows how two religious traditions, Christianity and African Traditional Religion, borrow wisdom from each other. This is a perfect example of inculturation. *Moya* (Spirit) which is the divine agent, enters and empowers men and women and is prevalent in African religious spirituality. "This validation of two different traditions," as Dube observes,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>61</sup> Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 192.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 193.

“is both a model of resistance and healing from imperial cultural forces of imposition, which depend on devaluing difference and imposing one universal standard.”<sup>64</sup>

In the endeavour to inculturate religious life in sub-Saharan Africa, in particular Kenya, postcolonial insights from the foundational scholars and current postcolonial critics like Musa Dube provide a good tool for dealing with the false consciousness and the trauma done by the colonial representations of the people’s cultures. Another postcolonial thinker whose work is helpful in retrieving African cultures is Chinua Achebe. In his works, especially the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1957), Achebe aims to destabilize Europeans’ constructions of the past. He sets out to show his people the dignity they lost during the colonial period. He illustrates to the people that before the European colonial powers entered Africa, the Igbos had a philosophy of great depth, value, and beauty, which they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity.<sup>65</sup> It is pertinent to note that the European relationship with Africans was expressive of a superior-inferior model. Seeing themselves as the dominant and superior cultures and the Africans as the weak and inferior cultures, some missionaries saw nothing of value in the African cultures. They saw Africans as a *tabula rasa* in regards to beliefs and practices and so they introduced Christianity as a new religion, which did not require any aspect of people’s traditional religion. In this respect, Edward Fashole-Luke observed:

Western missionaries stressed aspects of discontinuity between Christianity and African Cultures and traditional religion to such an extent that they excluded the aspects of continuity between Christianity and African cultures and traditional religion. They condemned without proper evaluation African religious beliefs and practices, and substituted Western cultural and religious practices. This situation made it impossible for a person to be a Christian and remain genuinely and authentically an African.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, David Githii, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa laments:

The missionaries thought the “superior” Western culture could be used to civilise the “inferior” African cultures. They therefore endeavoured to rescue the depraved African souls from eternal fire by uprooting the African from his culture by shattering his traditional culture and trampling on his institutions ...

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>65</sup>Diana A. Rhoads, “Culture in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*,” *African Studies Review* 36 (1993): 61, accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/524733>.

<sup>66</sup>Edward Fashole-Luke, “Introduction,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. Edward Fashole-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings & Godwin Tasie (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1978), 357.

Missionaries like Scott and Arthur of the Scottish Presbyterian Church and others of their time believed that Africans could not be redeemed unless evils within their social systems were first destroyed ... They did not even take the initiative of trying to understand why the African way of life was the way it was and what the Western way of life could contribute to it. Thus, the missionary told the polygamist to give up all his wives apart from one so that he could become a Christian. Wives and children were driven away. This was totally confusing to an African who looked upon motherhood as a religious duty and the children as owned by the clan. Where was the love that the missionary preached to them? How could one love God and love one's neighbour and drive away wives and children who had become part of one's life? This made the Africans despise the Gospel, making evangelisation even more difficult.<sup>67</sup>

This alienation of the African peoples from their cultures and beliefs has awakened their African consciousness. Their cultures which were once termed as pagan and barbaric and severely condemned by the missionaries are now the springboard of many African theologians. Fabien Eboussi Boulaga is one such theologian who in his book *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, proposes an African perspective on Christ. In order to understand Jesus in an African perspective, Eboussi situates Christianity in its proper era away from where dogmas begin. An era that extends from the time of the Maccabees (167 B.C.E) to the revolt of Bar Kochaba and the destruction of the Jewish nation-state (135 C.E.): "Here Judaism encounters limit-situations and learns how to survive persecution and preserve its identity in the midst of an irresistible, hostile civilization and empire. Here Judaism undergoes its greatest and most lasting mutations."<sup>68</sup> In this way, he grounds an African understanding of Christ from the Jewish background of colonial oppression and resistance.

### 1.7 Literature Review

This review of literature helps to identify different areas that require further research. This study intends to address and bridge some of the existing gaps on this topic. It will reveal limitations and weaknesses, strengths, and the gaps that previous researchers and scholars have failed to address adequately.

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<sup>67</sup>David M. Githii, "The East African Revival Movement and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa" (ThM Thesis., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1992). Quoted in Sung Kyu Park, *Christian Spirituality in Africa: Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Perspectives from Kenya* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 91-92.

<sup>68</sup>Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 90.

In her two foundational papers, “Inculturation of Consecrated Life in Africa”, and “Religious Vows in Traditional African Context”,<sup>69</sup> Gerard Nwagwu examines the special role of consecrated life in the mission of the church in Africa with the aim of inculturating it (consecrated life), and analyses the various areas that need to be inculturated. She observes that many spheres in the ecclesial life have shown commendable examples of inculturation, but little has been done on consecrated life. She highlights and discusses various areas of consecrated life that need inculturation, such as consecration and prayer life, evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, community life, formation programmes, and separation from the congregation through dismissal. She recognizes that few congregations, for example, have made efforts in regards to wearing native attire for a habit and adopting some typical African forms of worship during religious professions.

She concludes by calling for a wider and more comprehensive search in these areas with a view of making Christ—chaste, poor, and an obedient Son of the Father—alive in diverse cultural situations so as to recapture anew the lost significance of consecrated life. This study responds academically to her call by extensively researching and analysing the religious consecration rites in light of ATR beliefs and practices.

“Inculturation of Religious Community in Africa” by Anastasia Lott<sup>70</sup> is similar to Nwagwu’s work on the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa; she takes it a step further by focusing on the inculturation of community life. She is in agreement with Nwagwu that little has been done in the area of inculturation of consecrated women in Africa. Being an expatriate American working in East Africa,<sup>71</sup> Lott sees the task of inculturating of religious life in Africa as a task of African religious and other religious working in Africa. Her article on how sisters relate with each other within their religious family and the wider community is meant to provoke further reflection and research. For instance, she discusses briefly the image of sisters in the society and observes that many do not comprehend religious life fully.

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<sup>69</sup>Gerard Nwagwu, “Inculturation of Consecrated Life in Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 39 (1997): 130-148; Gerard Nwagwu, “Religious Vows in Traditional African Context,” *African Ecclesial Review* 50 (2008): 132-151. These are theological papers written with the aim of encouraging and inviting a continuous inculturation of consecrated life in Africa in accordance with the *African Synod—Special Assembly of Bishops for Africa and Madagascar*, which emphasized inculturation of consecrated life for effective evangelization. Gerard Nwagwu is a religious sister belonging to an African indigenous congregation in Nigeria.

<sup>70</sup>Anastasia Lott, “Inculturation of Religious Community Life in Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 37 (1995): 238-257.

<sup>71</sup>Anastasia Lott is a Maryknoll Sister working in Bura-Tana in the Diocese of Garissa Kenya.

She also describes how religious sisters go into great depths explaining to their families how their salaries are spent, despite the sisters' careers as teachers or nurses.

Lott concludes her essay by highlighting areas that need to be explored. These include community life, traditional African values, people's experience of religious life, the influence of emerging social dynamics such as urbanization on traditional cultural values and religious community life, the impact of tribalism and ethnic conflict on society and on religious community life, and the promotion of inculturation from the grass roots instead of from the top down. My research will respond to some of these issues, like the integration of African traditional values concerning marriage into religious life. Hence, it will help shed more light on the understanding of religious life in an African context for it seeks to look at the religious consecration in the light of African Traditional beliefs and practices.

Joan Burke has also studied the inculturation of sisterhood in Africa.<sup>72</sup> Her study was carried out among the Congolese sisters of Notre Dame de Narmur in the year 2001. She looked at how the Congolese sisters were incorporating aspects of the local community into their religious life. She observed that the sisters had been able to successfully incorporate methods of conflict resolution with those of the traditional African conflict resolution methods. Other aspects of village patterns that greatly influenced the sisters include the dressing habit; the sisters have adopted a local dress, as well as common activities, and solidarity.

Most importantly for this study, she explored the issue of maternity and the Congolese understanding of the role of sisters in society, an aspect she refers to as "the root metaphor." She observed a changing trend from when the sisters were first insulted as "sterilized cows" who feared childbirth to their now being called "Mama for us all," meaning the Mother of all. Burke's work makes a great contribution to my understanding of my research topic. My research was carried out in East Africa particularly Kenya, and has shed more light on the understanding of consecrated life in the society.

In his book, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa: Liturgy and Inculturation*, Lumbala, François Kabasele describes how various religious congregations in Africa inculturate religious consecration. He observes that the consecration of a religious is one of the most inculturated African rites. His work has enriched my research by comparing how different

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<sup>72</sup>Joan Burke, *These Catholic Sisters are all Mamas! Towards the Inculturation of Sisterhood in Africa, an Ethnographic Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

cultures across Africa are inculturating religious life. Here are some of his insight on various congregations. I am quoting him at length to preserve the meaning of the rites:

In Congo (Zaire) the rite of religious profession has three elements: inviting the involvement of the parents and the ancestors; offering a pact of blood; and performing the rites of initiation; the rite of the pact of blood is the central part of the ceremony in Kinshasa. The words of the celebrant follow: "You are now to offer a drop on this white cloth. This cloth stained with your pure blood will be placed next to the rock of the altar and will remain there. It symbolizes the offering of your life every day in the service of the glory of God, our Father, and of men and women, our brothers and sisters. At the moment of communion, Christ will give you his blood, most holy and pure. You will drink it. And so, the pact of friendship between you and Christ will be concluded." When this is said, one by one the candidates prick their fingers to draw blood. They touch the cloth, which has been placed on the knees of the bishop. Next, the master of ceremonies presents the cloth to the faithful. The bishop then stands, turns to the people, and recites the prayer of blessing. Afterwards, the master of ceremonies places the now-stained cloth next to the stone of the altar.<sup>73</sup> ...

In Kasai, Congo the profession of the Sisters of Charity places a great deal of emphasis on the parents and elders and through them the ancestors. The rite begins with a dialogue between the parents and the bishop concerning their frame of mind about their daughter. This dialogue is extended to the entire community in a traditional formal discourse. Before reciting the formula for her commitment, the candidate receives blessing from her parents. The blessing is done with white kaolin or with the ashes from their home hearth. The parents say: "We who are your family, we have nothing against you, we let you leave, without rancor, and may your way be white like the kaolin. Do not step on the scorpion or the snake. May you only find soft earth beneath your feet."<sup>74</sup> ...

In Cameroon, the family of the prospective religious steps toward the altar and presents their daughter (or son), completely giving her up. Then they offer her a stalk of the palm tree and say, "Be like a palm whose fruit gives precious oil. In your consecration, be productive." She is then presented with a stalk of *makabo*, a plant with large leaves whose configuration allows rainwater to run down their own stalks as well as those of their neighbours. Words commending solidarity and support are spoken, and the candidate responds, "Thank God." The celebrant then questions the candidate, "Do you remember if you have anything against your brother or sister?" The candidate asks forgiveness for all. She prostrates herself during the singing of the litanies. The celebrant concludes with a formula of absolution, and the call, the invitation, and the profession of vows are made.<sup>75</sup> ...

In Malawi the sisters use corn flour (the symbol of life, *Nsima*; the staple in the diet of the people is made from corn flour) to express the gift given on the part of the parents. They offer the flour to the celebrant as a sign that they

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<sup>73</sup>Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa*, 97.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 97.



are offering the life of their child. Religious also use fire as a symbol of their contribution and their cooperation in the work of the consecration of their sister. In a way similar to initiation, one of the responsible parties or a superior rubs oil on the candidate. In traditional rituals the one who gives the name to the child is the one who rubs this oil.<sup>76</sup>

The above rituals do not involve marriage per se; the use of traditional marriage rituals is however not unique to Kenyan society. In relating the experiences of inculturation in consecrated life in Bantu Africa, Kiaziku tells of the profession of sisters where there are rites which recall those of traditional marriage, for example, the escort of young girls who go looking for the bride and present her to the bridegroom. He explains that in some places the place of the escort is taken by a maternal uncle or by parents, and the importance of their role is thus acknowledged.<sup>77</sup>

The need to make consecrated life authentic in the light of inculturation is indicated by this wide and varied practice of inculturation of consecration rites by the African religious. In her work, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization in Africa*, Gloria Kenyuyfoon endeavours to bring to light how religious life in its essence, could be integrated in the African cultures with its values and challenges. Kenyuyfoon cautions that religious life will remain “superficial, worthless, meaningless and dysfunctional, to Africans if it does not penetrate their worldviews and transform them from within.”<sup>78</sup> She observes that African religious women today suffer from a form of dualistic situation in which they find themselves caught between being African women and being religious. Religious life, rather than putting them in a renewed relationship to their culture with the mission of transforming and uplifting it, alienates them from this reality and from their people.<sup>79</sup> She underscores the importance of how religious life, particularly the evangelical counsels, could be incarnated into the African culture. She also emphasizes the contribution of African religious women to the enrichment of the form, understanding, expression, and appreciation of the Gospel and of religious life. This, Kenyuyfoon says, “calls for a rediscovery of their identity and role as women in the African culture and the possible elevation of some of the values of womanhood in the African culture to religious life.”<sup>80</sup> In general, Kenyuyfoon explores how religious life could be

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>77</sup>Vicente Carlos Kiaziku, *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007), 114.

<sup>78</sup>Kenyuyfoon, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization in Africa* (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Gaba Publication, 2012), 4.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 6.

authentically lived and interpreted from the African perspective in a way that is comprehensible, valuable and that, which gives meaning to people's lives.<sup>81</sup> This present work has benefited much from Kenyufoon's insights as it investigates how religious women in the light of inculturation are modelling religious life in an African way, in order to make it more authentic and comprehensible to Kenyans.

## Conclusion

This review of the related literature reveals that much effort has been expended in various parts of Africa to inculturate religious life. My research will be a contribution to the understanding of the inculturation of religious life, especially with respect to the marriage metaphor distinctive to the Kenyan context. Religious life will be more authentic if it is rooted in African cultures. In addition, this study will enrich religious life in the entire church.

## 1.8 The Organization of the Study

This thesis is structured into seven chapters:

*Chapter one* presents the introduction and the background of the study. It provides an overview of the method, review of literature and theoretical framework to be adopted. The chapter also discusses the background of inculturation.

*Chapter two* will discuss inculturation in Kenya. In addition, the chapter traces the history of the metaphor of the "bride of Christ" in relation to religious women. Since Vatican II the African and North American and Europe congregations have treated the bridal metaphor differently. In North America and Europe, the ancient metaphor is no longer in use. The congregations in North America and Europe contend that the bridal metaphor fosters a narrow and romantic spirituality of "Jesus and I" relationship. Some have therefore substituted the metaphor with the phrase, "Woman of the Church".<sup>82</sup> They argue that the phrase "Woman of the Church" is more outwardly oriented and geared towards social justice. This disparity in usage is due to cultural factors such as feminism, the theology of inculturation where new congregations are being founded in Africa with no links with North America and Europe, the cultural perspective on the practice of marriage, the indigenous nature of many congregations in Africa, and changes that came with the Second Vatican

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>82</sup>Sister Mary Justina (not real name) interview by Jemima Kiboro, August 30, 2014.

Council on the renewal of religious life. These factors will be expounded more in chapter two. Feminism is the major factor in this disparity. The feminist movement is not widely spread in Africa. Nevertheless, the situation is changing as more women have risen to fight for economic, legal, and political change. According to Gwendolyn Mikell, African feminism has a different focus from that of Western feminism. African feminism is concerned with issues of economic survival while Western feminism is mainly concerned with variation and choice within sexuality and debates about the female body and patriarchy.<sup>83</sup> Researching the perceptions of feminism and its effects on voter conscientiousness in Kenya, Nyokabi Kamau observes that feminism in Kenya is still treated with suspicion by men and even by women who have worked in the Movement. She observes that some women find it difficult to refer to themselves as feminists, even though their work seems to support what feminists aim to do. She notes that many women, especially the married ones, have abandoned the Movement on the grounds that there are many women who are in good relationships with their men and hence not comfortable with the feminist discourse. She observes that others see feminism as an oppressive system open only to elite college-educated women. Women have also harboured sentiments that anything to do with feminism is foreign. Nyokabi further explains that this position has been due to a “misconception of what feminism is and its association with the more radical stance that was publicized more than the core of feminism, which is to her humanism”.<sup>84</sup> However, Nyokabi notes that some women have embraced feminism. Prof. Wanjiku Kabira is one such woman who argues that “African women need to embrace feminism as it provides them with a platform to fight injustices against women, which many men condone or simply ignore”.<sup>85</sup> Nyokabi urges that the feminist movement is relevant to all women. She calls for a change and a reorganization of the feminist movement in Kenya in order to address the existing oppressive system.<sup>86</sup> The Assumption Sisters of Nairobi were founded in order to care for women and youth. In their diverse ministries, they ensure that they work towards supporting and empowering women. They are also open to feminist theology.

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<sup>83</sup>Ann E. Bilddlecom, Review of *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. Mikell Gwendolyn in *Population and Development Review*, 24 (1998): 405, accessed on April 10, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable2807991>.

<sup>84</sup>Nyokabi Kamau. 2014. “Perceptions of feminism and its effects on voter conscientiousness: A Kenyan woman perspective,” accessed on April 11, 2015 [http://ke.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2014/01/perceptions\\_of\\_feminism\\_its\\_effect\\_on\\_voter\\_psychology\\_by\\_dr\\_nyokabi\\_kamau.pdf](http://ke.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2014/01/perceptions_of_feminism_its_effect_on_voter_psychology_by_dr_nyokabi_kamau.pdf).

<sup>85</sup>Nyokabi Kamau. 2014. “Perceptions of feminism.”

<sup>86</sup>Nyokabi Kamau. 2014. “Perceptions of feminism.”

*Chapter three* discusses African traditional marriage in Kenya. It also describes the different processes or stages of customary marriage in the African traditional community vis-à-vis the consecrated life, i.e., the various stages a young woman undergoes in order to become a consecrated woman. These include the stage of being an aspirant, a postulant, a novice, a junior sister, and ultimately admission into final profession. I will show a relationship between African customary marriage and consecrated life.

*Chapter four* launches the case study for the research. It contains videos illustrating the inculturation of the rite of religious profession ceremonies. The analysed videos included those taken by indigenous congregations in Kenya, the Emmanuel Sisters from Murang'a diocese and the Assumption sisters of Nairobi. Further, two videos from international congregations—Sisters of Mercy and Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Mother of God are analysed. In addition is my own video taken during my final profession and my observation of six final profession ceremonies.

*Chapter five* contains telephone interviews with the sisters. The goal of the study was to explore how religious women are integrating aspects of ATR in their profession rites to establish, the perception of ordinary people towards consecrated life and to assess the use of the marriage model among the African sisters to see if they find it operative in their lives and ministry.

This research attempts to: 1) understand how the Kenyan religious women are integrating aspects of ATR into their religious profession rites. 2) assess the use of the marriage model among the African congregations to see if they find it meaningful in their lives and ministry and 3) to find out how ordinary people perceive consecrated life in Kenya. The overall objective is to have a deeper understanding of consecrated life in the light of inculturation.

*Chapter six* provides an analysis guided by the theoretical framework of the study. This study helps to shed light on the status of religious women in Kenya. Taking the example of the Agĩkũyũ traditional mythical mother and founder of the Agĩkũyũ people of Kenya, known as Mũmbi, which means the one who moulds or creates, the study proposes that the religious women in Kenya be understood as moulders or Co-creators. The Agĩkũyũ mythical mother Mũmbi represents how women share in the mystery of creation with Mogai (the divider of the universe or God). The religious women like other women in Kenya are Co-creators and moulders by virtue of their life enhancing-ministries.

*Chapter seven* gives conclusion, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.

## 1.9 On Self-Positioning

My interest in studying religious studies has its roots in my identity as a Kenyan religious woman. More importantly, my choice of thesis topic is as a result of my personal experience of the Agĩkũyũ traditional rituals of marriage within my religious profession and on my general experiences with the ordinary people as a professed sister.

I came into contact with religious women when I went to high school, which gave me an opportunity to know and to interact with them. As my admiration for them grew, I decided to join religious life after my high school education. I joined the congregation of The Assumption Sisters of Nairobi in the year 2000 and started my religious formation. After three years of intense formation about religious life, I was admitted to make my first profession. Then after a period of six years of discernment as a temporary professed, I asked to make my final profession, and my request was granted. During my discernment, I was also enrolled in the Religious Studies program at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). As a student I learnt the importance of separating religious beliefs from scholarship on religion. In addition, my experience in the department of Linguistics and Religious Studies at the University of Saskatchewan (Canada) has further enhanced my academic study of religion, especially on the necessity of separating personal beliefs from scholarship on religion.

When I had to choose a topic for the course work and thesis, I decided to study the inculturation of Consecrated Life in Kenya: how traditional rituals are being integrated into the profession ceremonies, how different people perceive consecrated life and what status they accord to religious women. It is interesting to pursue this research on inculturation of consecrated life while I am in North America as this will help me to compare how religious women in African and non-African churches think of the long tradition of referring to religious women as “brides of Christ.” Through my interaction with some North American religious women, I have learnt that some of the religious congregations have ceased to use the phrase “bride of Christ.”

I am aware that my identity as a consecrated person and a person who has experienced the traditional Kikuyu rituals in my final profession may be seen as a bias factor that may affect the credibility of my research and my status as an academic. Recognizing this, I have attempted to look beyond my personal religious commitment. More importantly, I aspire to be guided in my research not by my beliefs and assumptions but by the theories, methods, and scholarly principles of investigation as developed in the discipline of Religious Studies and other disciplines in today’s academia. This research is not in any way intended to be an

apologetic work in favour of religious women in Kenya. My task is to interpret collected data about consecrated life following the requirements of academic religious studies.

Being a Kenyan and a consecrated person, I may be considered as an insider in this research. There are several advantages of collecting data in the congregation of the Sisters of Emmanuel and Assumption Sisters of Nairobi as an insider-researcher: first, my commitment will help me to grasp the situation more concretely than I might have in the absence of this commitment. Second, obtaining permission to conduct the research, to interview, to get access to the records and documents from the congregation was easier and facilitated the research process. Finally, my close connection with religious women in Kenya and in Canada has made it easier to identify potential project participants. For my research project, I made good use of these advantages in collecting the data. I could collect research data during the day and even in the evening, which the outsider might not have achieved. This provided continuity in the collection of the research data which in turn made it possible to collect more detailed and more versatile, hence more trustworthy, research data. The religious women who participated in the data collection process were my colleagues. Thus, during the data collection, my requests were almost never rejected by the two congregations, while an outsider in such a study might have experienced rejection. My colleagues showed respect for my research and myself by sharing their time and knowledge with me. For instance, some of the participants gave importance to the study by sharing information and allocated time for this project on a friendly and voluntary basis. Four participants who were not available for telephone interview, completed the surveys via internet (e-mail). They also communicated with me to make sure that I had received them and said that I was welcome to ask any further questions for my research. I could also complete my missing data easily by calling the participants back and asking them clarifying questions. This also enhanced the trustworthiness of the research data. The fact that the participants were able to reach me due to my insider status also provided them with the opportunity to consult me regarding the questions they did not understand. For example, in a spontaneous conversation I held with one elderly religious woman who had a problem with English, she asked, “What did you mean by the question suggesting another model apart from the bride of Christ?” Thus I explained and translated the question for her in the Gĩkũyũ language so that she could now understand. I said, “I wanted to learn from you what other phrase or term you can suggest to be used to refer to religious women apart from the bride of Christ.” She suggested that religious women be regarded as *Thingĩ* (virgins) like the Virgin Mary.

My awareness of my status as an insider should be seen as an indication that I fully realize the necessity to suspend my own view while pursuing an academic study of the inculturation of consecrated life, a life that I have embraced together with other religious women.

## Chapter Two

### Inculturation and Brief History of the Bride of Christ Metaphor in Relation to Religious Women

In order to contextualize my discussion, this chapter offers a brief overview of the concept of inculturation. The chapter further discusses the history of the bride of Christ metaphor in relation to religious women. As discussed in chapter one, there is a break in the way the metaphor is used among different religious congregations. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), most congregations in the Europe and North America ceased to use the metaphor to refer to religious women. Some religious congregations substituted the phrase with the term “Woman of the Church” while the African churches have continued to use the term. Some of the reasons for this disparity were preliminarily discussed in chapter one.

#### 2.1 Inculturation

The history of the idea of inculturation reflects the history of the church’s changing awareness of different cultures and different claims about reality. As Edward Antonio has observed this awareness was officially instituted and publically expressed in the pre-Vatican II papal encyclicals of the early 1960s (e.g., *Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris: Peace on Earth* (1963)). These began the process of reconsidering the Church’s relationship with the modern world, a relationship whose history was marked by frequent clashes of different kinds.<sup>1</sup> Antonio explains, these were clashes of the Church with modernity and with indigenous cultures in the colonial and imperial contexts which it had helped to shape in different ways.<sup>2</sup>

The term inculturation has no one single acceptable or standardised definition. It is a term that can be considered from many angles. Ary Crollius has described it as a concept that is in the borderlands between anthropological sciences and theology and heavy with implications from both these areas of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Masson, a professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, first used the term shortly before the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962.<sup>4</sup> According to Shorter, Joseph Masson called for “a more urgent

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Antonio, ed., *Inculturation and Postcolonial Discourse in African Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 34.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>3</sup>Ary Roest Crollius and Theoneste Nkeramihigo, *What Is So New About Inculturation?* (Rome: Gregorian Biblical Bookshop, 1991), 1.

<sup>4</sup>Alyward Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 10.



need for a Catholicism that is inculturated in a variety of forms.”<sup>5</sup> The term gained a wider acceptance and attention at the time of the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), which took place between December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1974 and April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1975. Here, the Society of Jesus used the word ‘inculturation’ and issued a decree on it.<sup>6</sup>

Shorter defines inculturation as “the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures, the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.”<sup>7</sup> The most commonly used definition is attributed to Pedro Arrupe. He defines inculturation as “the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the cultures, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about ‘a new creation.’”<sup>8</sup> It could be said from the above definition that inculturation goes back to the incarnation of Jesus Christ as recorded in John 1:14 (The word became flesh and dwelt among us). By becoming human, Jesus Christ became incarnated into a particular culture. Still, while carrying out his ministry, he made use of the cultural elements, wisdom, values, parables and traditions of his time and people. Following in the model of incarnation, inculturation incarnates the gospel in any given culture that it encounters.<sup>9</sup> Hence, inculturation as incarnation is understood not in terms of God assuming human flesh, but that Christianity is being born in the various cultures that it encounters.

Most definitions, as Peter Schineller has observed, underline the goals of inculturation, which include “the rooting of Christianity in diverse cultures, the transformation of cultures in the light of the gospel, the evangelization of every aspect of the individual and society of a people, the naturalizing of the church in every culture.”<sup>10</sup>

According to Waliggo, inculturation means:

the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his message of salvation evermore understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time ... the

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<sup>5</sup>Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation*, 10.

<sup>6</sup>Crollius, *What Is So New About Inculturation?* 2.

<sup>7</sup>Shorter, *Toward A Theology of Inculturation*, 11.

<sup>8</sup>Pedro Arrupe, “Letter to the Whole Society,” in *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits* 7 (1978): 1-9. Quoted in Starkloff Carl F., *A Theology of the In-Between: The Value of Syncretic Process* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2002), 12-13.

<sup>9</sup>Donatus Oluwa Chuku, *The Church as the Extended Family of God: Towards a New Direction for African Ecclesiology* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corp., 2011), 104.

<sup>10</sup>Peter Schineller, “Inculturation: “A Difficult and Delicate Task”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (1996): 109-112.

reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought-patterns of each people ... the conviction that Christ and his Good News are even dynamic and challenging to all times and cultures as they become better understood and lived by each people. It is the continuous endeavour to make Christianity truly feel at home in the cultures of each people.<sup>11</sup>

This idea is well articulated by Oliver Onwubiko when he asserts that “the message of Christ is the message of salvation, as salvation means healing, hence the African Christian should be helped to feel that the message of Christ is not primarily a set of doctrinal, ritual or moral laws, but rather the good news of overcoming the estrangement of the state of sin through the appearance of Jesus the Christ as the new healing reality.”<sup>12</sup>

The reason for the attention given to inculturation today is that the world today has entered an age of cultural awareness. Africans especially are digging in the past and discovering that they are not all the uncivilized, uncultured and untutored people of the Western imagination; instead, they have been greatly endowed with human dignity.<sup>13</sup> According to Shagbaor Wegh, this awareness is being accompanied by a recognition of cultural diversity, which must be respected if the work of evangelization is to succeed.<sup>14</sup> He observes that in Africa, what one encounters is a Western form or model of Christianity and hence there is a need to de-westernize Christianity. The church according to Wegh, is showing more interest in inculturation because he believes that a true and lasting evangelization is only possible through inculturation.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Justin Ukpang points out that the future of Christianity in Africa is tied up with inculturation. Christianity, he contends, will be a strong or a weak force, a success or failure, depending on the church’s commitment to carry out inculturation in all aspects of people’s lives.<sup>16</sup>

The Catholic Church in Kenya has inculturated the following aspects: liturgy sung to traditional music, liturgical dances which occur as part of entrance rites, the offertory procession, the recessional procession, and priestly the vestments, altar cloths, and vessels

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<sup>11</sup>John Mary Waliggo, *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul’s Publication Africa, 1986), 12.

<sup>12</sup>Oliver Olozie Onwubiko, *Theory and Practice of Inculturation: An African Perspective* (Enugu, Nigeria: SNAAP Press, 1992), xi.

<sup>13</sup>Shagbaor Wegh, *Understanding and Practising Inculturation* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Caltop Publications, 1997), 30.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>16</sup>Justine Ukpang, “Inculturation: A Major Challenge in the Church in Africa Today,” *African Ecclesial Review* 37 (1996): 266.

designed in an African way.<sup>17</sup> In preaching, most priests adapt the traditional techniques of passing on messages like the use of proverbs, stories, pithy sayings, and so on. The artwork in the churches is also Africanised; for example, the Last Supper is often depicted not with the male apostles only, but as a reflection of the African extended family—men, women and children. Africanized biblical motifs are also painted on the walls of many churches. In her paper, “The Theology of Inculturation and the African Church”, Sussy Gumo Kurgat presents research focused into the ways Busia people of Kenya are inculturating Catholicism.<sup>18</sup> Among the areas she observed are: first, the integration of the Small Christian Communities (SCC) in the parochial stratification. SCC is the grassroots of the church in Busia and hence, a major agent of inculturation. Second, in the area of moral theology, Kurgat observes that, through SCC, there is the promotion of social justice. The SCC promotes morality by attending to the sick, the poor, orphans and the old and the disadvantaged.<sup>19</sup> Third, regarding the idea of the church as a family, Kurgat notes that through the SCC, the paradigm of the church as a family is realized by underlining the concept of family, the clan, and kinship as an effective means of promoting communion. Fourth, on the matter of African leadership, Kurgat notes that the presence of local African priests, sisters, and bishops has enhanced the inculturation of the Christian message, as they are able to understand the local dialects of Luhya language and the culture of the people. Fifth, regarding theology, Kurgat states that African Christian theology has been inculturated. She describes the different ways that the Busia people related to Christ. Christ is referred to as the mediator or intermediary, in connection with his role as a traditional intermediary who preserves due order. Other terms to refer to Christ include a king, who mediates between the living and the ancestors, and Saviour and Redeemer, who saves people from the various situations that threaten life. Christ

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<sup>17</sup> The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) opened the doors for local cultures and pointed out that the church has no particular culture. The African Synod too seeks to contextualize the Gospel message in intrinsic African values. So it can be said that the genealogy of inculturation in Kenya and elsewhere is an ever open dialogue since cultures are dynamic.

<sup>18</sup>Sussy Gumo Kurgat, “The Theology of Inculturation and the African Church,” *Greener Journal of Social Sciences* 1 (2011): 31-41.

<sup>19</sup>Kurgat, “The Theology of Inculturation,” 36. Though the non-African churches do not have the Small Christian communities (SCC) due to the severe shortage of priests and a culture that is individualistic, they too promote social justice by contributing money and material goods towards the less privileged. This is done individually, or sometimes they can form a temporary group and donate foodstuffs and clothes to the Community Donation Centres and food banks which latter distribute to the poor and the less privileged. The local bishop too organizes an annual appeal to which Catholics in his diocese could contribute money to aid the bishop to outreach the poor and the needy of the world.

is also the liberator and healer. Lastly, in African Christian marriage, Kurgat observes that the church is inculturating African customary marriage. This is done by refining the progressive stages that led to African marriage and situating them within Christian marriage. Kurgat's findings represent what is happening in the Kenyan Catholic Church concerning inculturation.

Other scholars researching on inculturation in Africa have reported that inculturation has not taken deep roots yet. Shineller, for instance, has observed that, in many parts of Africa, crucial moments of human life, such as birth, marriage, healing, death, and burial, are often celebrated in two different ways, namely, in the traditional religious manner, and then in the Christian manner.<sup>20</sup> There is little interaction or integration between the two traditions. Hence, "marriage is celebrated in the home in the traditional manner, and then the couple comes to church for the church wedding."<sup>21</sup> He therefore remarks, "African Christians continue to live in two different religious worlds, that of their traditional religions and that of Christianity which is heavily Westernized."<sup>22</sup> Bujo on his part has pointed out that the incarnation of Christianity into African cultures has been a failure.<sup>23</sup> He further laments that the theology of inculturation so often preached triumphantly in the African churches is a pompous irreverence, truly an ideological superstructure at the service of the bourgeoisie.<sup>24</sup> In addition, he sees it as a cause of some satisfaction that the African hierarchy has adopted a theology of inculturation as its official policy. He laments that there have been more words than actions, and one cannot help wondering how serious is the commitment of the bishops to a truly effective incarnation of Christianity in Africa.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, Bujo suggests that what the church needs to do today is to "uncover the vital elements of African culture which are stamped on the African soul."<sup>26</sup> Once African heritage has been clearly understood, Bujo holds that it can be placed alongside the biblical and patristic traditions and progress will be possible.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Shineller, "Inculturation: A Difficult and Delicate Task," 109-112.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 109-112.

<sup>23</sup>Benezet Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi, Kenya: St. Paul Publication-Africa, 1990), 73.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 68.

Similarly, Emmanuel Martey argues that, “an inculturated church in Africa is a church emancipated from Western Imperialism and domination.”<sup>28</sup> The African Church, he continues, “cannot be truly inculturated if it continues to be dictated to and from Rome or any other city in the West.”<sup>29</sup> Other African theologians like Barth Chidili share Martey’s sentiments on the power imposed by Rome on the African church. Chidili questions why the African Synod (the Special Assembly of Bishops for Africa and Madagascar), for instance, was not held on African soil,<sup>30</sup> despite the church’s call for inculturation. They feel that that the Synod would have been the first and authentic chance for the Africans to deal with their problems on African land. Though the African bishops termed it a sign of unity, many African theologians termed it as “an African meal cooked in a Roman pot.”<sup>31</sup> In this case, Martey feels that, for inculturation to be fully achieved, “an ecclesiological revolution will be needed to transform the parent-child relationship between the North and the South.”<sup>32</sup>

Christianity does not need to become an ATR,<sup>33</sup> instead the gospel needs to be fully inculturated in order to feel at home in the African cultures. Take the example of Jesus, who was born in a particular culture and grew up to affirm as well as to confront it. It should be

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<sup>28</sup>Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 125.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. 124.

<sup>30</sup>The First African synod was held in Rome from 10 April-8 May, 1994. The Family Model of the church was given special attention. The second African Synod was held in Rome in 2009. The theme was, “The Church in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.”

<sup>31</sup>Barth Chidili, *Inculturation as a Symbol of Evangelization* (Jos, Nigeria: Mono Expressions, 1997), 6.

<sup>32</sup>Martey, *African Theology*, 125.

<sup>33</sup>In his book, Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, III: InterVarsity Books, 2007), Oden argues that Christianity is an ATR (African Traditional Religion) and calls on the Africans to rediscover their heritage in the African church fathers (Augustine, Tertullian, Origen, Cyril etc.). His deep conviction is that the African fathers were faithful witnesses to the apostolic faith. I do not agree with his position that Christianity is an ATR. Yes, it is true that these fathers were part of the patriarchs known as the Alexandrian fathers, but their theology was very much influenced by Latin/Greek schools of thought, even though these were in Carthage and Hippo (modern day Algeria and Alexandria (Egypt)). My second point of departure from the author would be on what he means by ATR. Most authors of ATR describe a religion that has more to do with sub-Saharan Africa than with North Africa. After studying various aspects of ATR, I think it very far-fetched to try and claim that theology of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century of North Africa had anything to do with ATR. If it is looked from the point of view of an African cultural and religious apologetics, which is basically anthropological in approach, one may say so. However, intrinsically Christianity is beyond that, because it springs from its Jewish roots and everyone is converted into it including these great theologians. Oden has oversimplified Christianity by calling it an ATR. His work is more of a useful reminder to Western Christians that Africa is one of the seedbeds of Christianity than it is to sub-Saharan Africans.

the same with the African cultures. Jesus should become incarnated into the African cultures as John Paul II has pointed out, “a faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not yet been received, not thoroughly thought through, nor lived out.”<sup>34</sup>

## 2.2 History of the Phrase “Bride of Christ” in Relation to Religious Women

In the Christian tradition, marriage serves as a powerful metaphor. It has been used to reflect a mystical union between God and the soul. Like the enterprising bride of the canticle in the Song of Songs, true believers should pursue the celestial bridegroom in anticipation of an ecstatic consummation in the afterlife.<sup>35</sup> It also reflects the marriage between Christ and his church of all believers. In addition, it has important institutional applications. By the eleventh century the bishop, standing *in loco Christi*, was customarily understood to be married to his see.<sup>36</sup> How did the metaphor come to be applied to consecrated women?

In the Christian communities of the first centuries, women had already come to be identified with consecrated virginity.<sup>37</sup> A rite of consecration was administered to the women who continued to remain in their families without marrying. Dyan Elliott argues that their preference for the vocation of virginity was precisely because they rejected the role of the bride and may have continued to resist even if the groom were Christ himself.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, some scholars have explained the attraction to the ascetic life of early Christian women by demonstrating that the renunciation paradoxically offered women the possibility of moving outside the constraints of socially and sexually conventional roles, of exercising power, and of experiencing a sense of worth, which was often unavailable to them within the traditional settings of marriage.<sup>39</sup> Even so, Elliott maintains that the exact motive that led women to choose lifelong virginity is not clear and scripture offers little to foster the exaltation of a life of virginity.<sup>40</sup> Castelli posits that the roots of ascetic life lies at the heart of Christian

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<sup>34</sup>Waliggo, *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*, 7.

<sup>35</sup>Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 1.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>37</sup>Consecrated virginity involves a spousal relationship while the life of a sister who has taken religious vows involves chastity but not virginity.

<sup>38</sup>Dyan Elliott, “Tertullian, the Angelic Life, and the Bride of Christ,” in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 16.

<sup>39</sup>Elizabeth Castelli, “Virginity and its Meaning for Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): 61, accessed on March 24, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002030>.

<sup>40</sup>Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 9.

tradition, particularly in Jesus' radical exhortations on the requirement of discipleship, as well as in Paul's advice to the early Christian communities to follow the example of celibate life (Mk. 8:34—9:1; Lk. 9:1—6; 1 Cor. 7).<sup>41</sup> Paul advocated a life of celibacy for the practical reason that time was very short until the return of Jesus and so people were expected to be preparing for the Kingdom of God rather than raising families.<sup>42</sup> In addition, Elliott argues that much of Paul's discourse on life of celibacy was geared towards men. For instance, the pastoral epistle stating that women would be saved through childbearing (1 Timothy 2:15) is an indication that there were some parties that excluded women from the privileges of chastity.<sup>43</sup>

Apparently, there are no female-authored writings to explain why women sought a life of virginity, only the testimonies and speculations of the church fathers about decisions that were deeply personal and individualistic. As a result, Elliott argues that much of the patristic writings about virginity was geared towards the discourse of *molestiae nuptiarum*—a discourse disparaging marriage and women alike.<sup>44</sup> The early church eschewed the institution of marriage for its reproductive potential and the gender roles it sustained. In particular, the strategies of church fathers focused on the mandatory subjection of the wife to her husband and highlighted the dangers that come with childbearing. Consequently, these strategies seemed to work well and many women eschewed marriage altogether.<sup>45</sup>

By spurning marriage, Elliott argues, these women were attempting to turn a sharp metaphysical corner, which if they did it successfully, would lead to gender transformation and hence remove them from the threat of marriage forever.<sup>46</sup> Elliott describes how the early Christians perceived the relationship between gender and chastity. She describes the anticipated transformations in two ways: first, by embracing chastity, women were understood to achieve gender parity by being spiritually transformed into 'males', which was a clear promotion in a patriarchal world. Second, the formulation was used to associate the transition to chastity with the angelic life or *vita angelica* of the resurrection alluded to by Christ (Luke 20:34-36).<sup>47</sup> In this future state, when marriage and giving in marriage would cease, certain Christians believed that gender would be abolished altogether. Still others

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<sup>41</sup>Castelli, *Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 65.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>46</sup>Elliott, *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe*, 16.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

believed that a life of virginity ushered in a realised eschatology here on earth in which the bodies of the chaste would become androgynous like angels.<sup>48</sup> Hence, by escaping marriage and its stigma of female inferiority, the women would become symbolically male with all the freedom this entailed, and as such, they would well live the angelic life while still in the flesh.

This notion of angelic life or *vita angelica* troubled Tertullian, a second century theologian from Carthage (b. ca. 160).<sup>49</sup> Because of his interpretation of Genesis 6:2—where the sons of God (interpreted as angels) intermarried with the daughters of men who gave birth to a race of giants—Tertullian feared that the *vita angelica* would create a situation of miscegenation between the female virgins and the angels. In response, Tertullian became very apprehensive of any effort to that would assimilate humankind and angels. He therefore cast the sexed human body as a point of difference between humans and angels and projected this even to the afterlife.<sup>50</sup> Thus, to show that the virgins were not angels but women, Tertullian applied the image of the “bride of Christ” or *Sponsa Christi* to the consecrated virgin as a disciplinary tactic to limit virginity’s potential to undo gender. Consecrated virgins were henceforth not equal to the angels nor to men; rather Tertullian made them subject to male authority—Christ and the Church Fathers.

Tertullian thus humbled the virgins by marrying them to Christ. To counter this situation, subsequent church tradition sought to transform the image of *Sponsa Christi* into a title of supreme honour. For instance, in his treatise, *On the Dress of Virgins*, Cyprian addressed the virgins, “whose glory, as it is more eminent, excites the greater interest. This flower of the ecclesiastical seed, the grace and ornament of spiritual endowment, a joyous disposition, the wholesome and uncorrupted work of praise and honour, God’s image answering to the holiness of Lord, the more illustrious portion of Christ’s flock.”<sup>51</sup> The Church Fathers, including Cyprian, Origen, Athanasius, Ambrose, and Augustine saw in the image of *Sponsa Christi* a way of disciplining the consecrated virgins. They used the image of *Sponsa Christi* to moderate women’s dress and behaviour, and to keep the virgins in seclusion away from men. Cyprian in particular was more concerned about of the “possibility of the sexual transgressions with men than with miscegenation with the angels”.<sup>52</sup> The consecrated virgin was to carry herself with due modesty and the decorum that befits Christ’s

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<sup>48</sup>Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 12.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 14-16.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 33



bride. The consecrated virgins were also put under the surveillance of male clerics, who were seen as standing *in loco Christi*.<sup>53</sup> Virginity was fetishized, as bodily intact and consecrated women were to undergo gynaecological examinations to ensure that they were still virgins.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Cyprian wrote, “If any of them shall prove to have been corrupted let her undergo full penance, because she who has been guilty of this crime is an adulteress, not against a husband, but Christ.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the consecrated virgin came to bear the weight of representing the church. As Elliot argues, “the church authorities were justified in prescribing so restrictive a role for the *sponsa Christi* insofar as the honor of the church was hanging in the balance. For once the consecrated virgin assumed the persona of *Christi sponsa*, she simultaneously became the ultimate type for the church as virgin bride, a privilege premised on her physical perfection.”<sup>56</sup> Some theologians even prescribed suicide as the best choice for the consecrated virgins who were in danger of being raped. In particular, Ambrose advised his sister Marcellina and her community that suicide was an acceptable remedy for a virgin whose chastity was put in jeopardy.<sup>57</sup>

By the fourth century, the consecration of virgins was characterized by the adoption of symbols of carnal marriage. The very institution she had rejected paradoxically defined the virgin. In the sixth and the seventh centuries, the term came to include widows and mothers,<sup>58</sup> and this was the beginning of the great tensions between the virginal and non-virginal brides. Chaste women were ranked according to their degree of their chastity. Virginity was to be rewarded a hundredfold, the widows sixtyfold and the married thirtyfold.<sup>59</sup> Virginal prestige continued to be reflected liturgically, with the virgins being consecrated in elaborate ceremonies. In particular, the virgin brides were veiled by the bishop while the non-virgins (widows and mothers) veiled themselves.<sup>60</sup> Liturgical stigmatization of the non-virginal women is also reflected in the choice of the days of the consecration. The virgin brides were consecrated on auspicious days: preferably Easter or Epiphany or the feast of one of the

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid. 57.

<sup>57</sup>Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.11.65, p.206 trans. LNP NFC, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., 10:373. ; *De Virginibus* 3.7.38, p. 334, trans. LNP NFC, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., p. 387. Quoted in Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 50, 58.

<sup>58</sup>Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, 67-105.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 65-66.

apostles, or at the very least a Sunday. The deaconess was ordained in Lent.<sup>61</sup> During this time, the institution of marriage was entirely overshadowed by the virgin's celestial marriage to Christ. Carnal marriage was presented as an inferior copy of the metaphysical marriage. Elliott argues that, by the end of the tenth century, the *persona* of *sponsa Christi* had evolved from a patristic disciplinary tactic to become a point of identification that women had themselves come to embrace. The coveted role was open to non-virgins and it was not confined to the cloister. Virginity had also come to be accepted as a state of mind.<sup>62</sup>

In the course of the late eleventh and twelfth century, the concept of the intact body continued to prevail in canon law and theology. Women who were raped were not to compare themselves with the true virgins. Liturgical practice continued to reflect this perspective in that the formal consecration that rendered a virgin *sponsa Christi* was withheld from a victim of rape.<sup>63</sup> However, the concept of the intact body was to be challenged by the radical reconsideration of marriage that was aimed at rehabilitating and dignifying the institution of marriage.<sup>64</sup> To dignify the institution of marriage, the apologists recognized that spiritualization and sacramentalization, a process of purification that could be achieved by divorcing marriage from the marriage act, would be the most effective. Hence, consent and intention were highly privileged rather than consummation.<sup>65</sup> With these changes in the institution of marriage, virginity and the persona of the *Sponsa Christi* saw considerable changes. Virginity began to lose its spiritual edge and the virginal nun's monopoly of the title *Sponsa Christi* came to be challenged. The non-virgins could now claim a sort of virtual virginity on the basis that they had not consented.<sup>66</sup> Liturgically, the dates for consecration were changed from the traditional dates of Easter or Epiphany to Sundays or other feast days. The ring was presented as optional, the ring and wreath were removed from any association with marriage, and the consecration had much less matrimonial imagery.<sup>67</sup>

As the idea of consent in marriage continued to be emphasized, this period saw the emergence of chaste heterosexual couples. This period also highlighted the relationship between men and women celibates. Elliott calls this phenomenon “heteroasceticism”—

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 111.

emotional attachment between men and women celibates.<sup>68</sup> Elliott notes that the partners in these relationships regarded themselves as participating in quasi-conjugal unions which, led to the increasing use of the language of love. As women continued to identify themselves with the role of the spouse as well as in nuptial terms, the clergy, who at this time had been emphasized as a type of Christ, felt encouraged to take the role of the celestial bridegroom.<sup>69</sup> Yet these women did not subserviently fall in with this false consciousness of the nuptial model, but as Elliot emphasizes, their participation in this form of nuptiality was not passive as they were exercising their prerogative of consent by grooming select members of the clergy, transforming them from mere mortals into plausible surrogates for the celestial bridegroom.<sup>70</sup>

By the thirteenth century, the bridal imagery was open to all men and women who through confession would be married to Jesus and become the bride of Christ. This period also saw the emergence of female mystics who appropriated the erotic imagery from the Song of Songs to describe their relationship with their beloved Christ. Mechtild of Magdeburg, a Beguine mystic, envisioned Christ lying by her side in bed, holding her with his left arm so that “the wound of his heart was enjoined so sweetly to her heart.”<sup>71</sup> The sensuousness of this imagery, argued Elliott, “seemed to be pressing the visionary envelope beyond the mere metaphoric.”<sup>72</sup> The visions of these mystics were characterized by somatic images. For instance, Bridget of Sweden (d.1373), Margery Kempe (d.1438), and Dorothea of Montau (d. 1394), who were all matrons and beneficiaries of the democratization of the bridal imagery, were reported to experience spiritual pregnancies, wounds of love, and feats of levitation. Rather than a transcendent experience, “metaphors progressively materialized, rendering bridal imagery ever more concrete”.<sup>73</sup>

The increasing use of erotic tones by female mystics, made the religious authorities mistrust the accounts of these women’s contacts with the supernatural. They became convinced that these women were in the grip of demonic seduction rather than divine rapture. By the fourteenth century, cases of demonic seduction of religious women increased. This phenomenon was largely favoured by the context of mystical spirituality wherein the inspired

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 186.

woman was regarded as having one foot in the spirit world.<sup>74</sup> Still, the proliferation of witchcraft trials, which were mainly associated with women, made the mystics feared as demoniacs. Elliott relates how the witch induction rituals paralleled the ceremony of the consecration of the virgin as a bride of Christ where a ring was exchanged and the new witch was thought to have sex with a demon as a consummation.<sup>75</sup> In the end, bridal mysticism created a thin line between fantasy and reality and the virgin elevated as Christ's bride ended up in a downward trajectory towards hell.<sup>76</sup>

By the fifteenth and sixteenth century the bridal metaphor was used in innovative but cautious ways, especially in writing by and for women's religious communities and this continued until the twentieth century.<sup>77</sup> After the Second Vatican II Council (1962-1965) most of the congregations in the West/Europe ceased to use the phrase along with many other religious symbols that no longer seem to have any value for their members, whereas the local congregations in Africa have held fast to the phrase bride of Christ and other symbols they inherited from the earlier generations of missionaries. As noted in chapter one, Some Western congregations have substituted "Woman of the church" for the bridal metaphor.<sup>78</sup> Other congregations have replaced the term with the language of discipleship while others do not have the replacement of the term, instead they refer themselves charismatically with their apostolates or mission. The congregations that use the phrase "Woman of the Church" contend that it is more outward oriented, more open, and more dedicated towards social justice and service while "bride of Christ" fosters a narrow private and romantic "Jesus and me" spirituality. However, some congregations in the West have challenged the use of the model "Woman of the Church." Sr. Ann Flanagan says about the model: "I had never heard the expression of "Women of the Church" used to substitute for 'Bride of Christ.' It seems a very poor, pale replacement. In fact, it is the very weakness of the substitute that triggered most of my reflections. 'Women of the Church' is valid enough as it stands, but it is nowhere near as evocative and rich as the term it is meant to replace. Frankly, it doesn't say much to me."<sup>79</sup> Sr. Ann Flanagan expressed that in her congregation, they don't use the term "bride of

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 243.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 272-273.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 286.

<sup>77</sup>Gregory Rabia, "Marrying Jesus: Brides and Bridegroom in Medieval Women's Religious Literature" (PhD Diss., University of North Carolina, 2007), accessed on February 11, 2016. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

<sup>78</sup>Sister Mary Justina (not real name) e-mail message to Jemima Kiboro, August 30, 2014.

<sup>79</sup>Ann Flanagan, "Brides of Christ closing the Year of Consecrated Life." Nun Blog, February 2, 2016, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://romans8v29.blogspot.com>

Christ” very much and they don’t have a replacement for it either. Instead, they think of themselves more in apostolic terms, and identify themselves charismatically as “Paulines” or “media nuns”, taking the relationship with Jesus as a matter of fact and of the public record.<sup>80</sup> Given the highly secularized culture, Sr. Flanagan says that she has found that when the expression bride of Christ is used today in the secular media in an article or post about sisters or about women religious in general, it is used with an air of bemusement or mild ridicule. She continues to argue that, today’s culture being unhealthy as it is, the expression “brides of Christ” can even be counter-productive and distasteful particularly outside of extremely fervent Catholic circles.<sup>81</sup>

In a series of informal email communications, Sister Lean (not her real name) confirmed that her congregation ceased to use the term bride of Christ after Vatican II. They replaced the term with the language of “Discipleship” in terms of their call to religious life.<sup>82</sup> Sister Salome (not her real name) from a different congregation says that she has a problem translating the “bride of Christ” metaphor to her mission and daily life as a religious. She prefers “Disciple” for she follows Jesus in poverty, chastity and obedience as a follower, as a disciple. Quoting Luke 24:32, she says she has a burning passion for God, for Jesus, for His Blessed Mother, for the church and the sacraments. She views Jesus as her brother and so she is a sister in Christ.<sup>83</sup> Sr. Monalisa (not real name) too does not identify with the term “bride of Christ” as much as she used to 50 years ago. However, she says that she personally considers herself as such since the intimacy of her personal relationship with Jesus as a spouse is natural for one who has consecrated all her affective and physical self-100% of self to God.<sup>84</sup>

It is important to note however, that, the “bride of Christ” metaphor has not fallen off completely among the Western congregations. For instance, Sr. Jane says that the term bride of Christ is in use again in the United States but with a different awareness. She says that she has a Pinterest Board called the “Divine Romance” and notes that even the non-Catholics are considering their relationship with Christ as divine romance. As such she concludes that the term bride of Christ has come full circle and now religious are embracing it again in the new orders (congregations). She contends that young people understand the

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<sup>80</sup>Flanagan, “Brides of Christ.”

<sup>81</sup>Flanagan, “Brides of Christ.”

<sup>82</sup>Sister Lean, e-mail message to Jemima Kiboro, February 9, 2016.

<sup>83</sup>Sister Salome, e-mail message to Jemima Kiboro, January 28, 2016.

<sup>84</sup>Sister Monalisa, e-mail message to Jemima Kiboro, February 1, 2016.

metaphor and as such individual sisters may say that they are married to Christ. However she says that they don't use the term in her congregation which is monastic except in the profession.<sup>85</sup> To justify the use of the bride of Christ metaphor, Sr. Sarah (not her real name) explains, "In the light of Pope John Paul's [II] theology of the body, the spousal nature of the human person has to be of central importance in the consecrated life. So the idea of being spouses of Christ is still very relevant and important. Other approaches, I think, do not fully do justice to what John Paul II called 'an adequate anthropology'"<sup>86</sup> To identify with the bridal metaphor, Sr. Helena Burns compares her religious call to that of marriage. For her, to be married to Jesus is "Real. Very real. It is not poetry. It is not metaphor."<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Sr. Penny Ann (not her real name) views herself as espoused to Christ. She reflects: "In my heart of hearts I know that I am espoused (reserved, promised) to Him for whom my heart longs ... He is my life, my love, my hope, my desire, the one for whom I spend my energies, proclaim with my life, worship as Lord, listen to, try to imitate, let into my thoughts, imagination and memory... so then I am espoused, yearn and strive to correspond to his initiative as He leads me towards an ever more perfect union which will be fully realized in the eternal Wedding Feast of Heaven where I hope to hear him say: 'Come my beautiful bride and enter into the joy of your Lord.'"<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Sr. Anne Flanagan observes that the term "bride of Christ" may have fallen by the wayside in the affluent world, but it is making a comeback among some younger religious women. She feels that it is possible that some of the younger religious women are taken with romance of all things "retro" and might be somewhat uncritical about old things. She thinks that the younger sisters are telling them (members of her congregation) something very important about the imagery of the "bride of Christ" which they need to listen to. Sr. Flanagan believes very strongly that the "language of the 'bride of Christ' ought to remain part of the self-understanding of religious women, but not flaunted or used casually in the secular contexts where it can be either grossly misinterpreted or treated as the quaint but bizarre belief of a marginal culture." The language, she says is based on an analogy and not a bare fact that stands on its own.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Sister Jane, e-mail message to Jemima Kiboro, January 27, 2016.

<sup>86</sup>Sister Sarah, e-mail message to Jemima Kiboro, February 3, 2016.

<sup>87</sup>Helena Burns, "What is it like to being married to Jesus?" Berkley forum blog, November 5, 2014, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/forum/what-is-it-like-being-married-to-jesus>

<sup>88</sup>Sister Penny Ann, e-mail message to Jemima Kiboro, February 2, 2016.

<sup>89</sup>Flanagan, "Brides of Christ."

Having looked at the use of “bride of Christ” metaphor among some Western congregations, it is also reasonable to look at how it is perceived in the Kenyan society. In Kenya and other African countries the phrase “brides of Christ” is still being regularly used to refer to consecrated women. In my view, the bridal metaphor has endured in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa because of the prominence the institution of marriage is accorded in African traditions. The African society expects men and women to marry for the perpetuation of their lineages. Since marriage is seen to generate life, the use of the marriage symbolism may denote that the religious women are giving life in an African perspective. It cannot also be claimed that marriage is not prominent in the Western cultures because marriage is a fundamental part of every culture. However, there is a cultural difference in the way that marriage customs are carried out. For instance, the institution of bride price which is a central aspect of traditional marriages, is not practiced in the Western marriages. Another aspect is the theology of inculturation where the entire African Catholic Church is crying for its identity. This has led to founding many congregations in Africa which are indigenous in nature. Since these congregations are founded in order to respond to the local needs of the people, they identify themselves with the people’s local customs. Even where the international congregations are still present in Africa, they are handing over the leadership mantle to the African religious women due to their diminishing numbers in Europe and North America hence these congregations are also becoming Africanized. As they become more African, they become more inculturated to be relevant to their local communities.

Another reason that has contributed to this change is feminism, which has had much influence in the West, but has not been as well accepted in Africa. When the feminist movement was taking root in the West, the African women were, as Musa Dube says, “encouraged to put aside the gender concerns and focus on ‘first things first’ fighting the colonizer for national liberation.”<sup>90,91</sup> The changes that came with Vatican II also influenced

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<sup>90</sup>Musa Dube, “Searching for the Lost Needle: Double Colonization and Postcolonial African Feminisms,” *Studies in World Christianity* 5 (1999): 217.

<sup>91</sup>Musa Dube does encourage women in Africa to continue fighting oppression against women. In her *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Dube laments the fact that many feminists’ victories have been won, but apparently, the patriarchy and its institutions have not fully yielded to women’s demands. She therefore calls for a *luta continua*, a struggle for justice and liberation that always continues. African female theologians in Africa have taken the challenge and have tried to challenge the oppressive African cultures and the teaching authority of the church in entrenching patriarchal values. Maaradizo Mutambara, “African Women Theologies Critique Inculturation,” in *Inculturation and Postcolonial*

the Western congregations which have been there for a long time. The African congregations and the Catholic Church in Africa were still young during Vatican II. It was also a time of armed struggle for independence in African countries and much effort was directed towards political liberation. It is within this context that the bridal metaphor will be investigated in this study to see if Kenyan religious women see it as having any benefit to them.

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*Discourse in African Theology*, ed. Edward P. Antonio (New York: Peter Lang 2006), 180, for instance has criticised the images of patriarchy to the Christological paradigms proposed by the male theologians. Such images include, Jesus the Chief, Jesus the Elder brother, Jesus the Master of initiation, etc., as they are drawn from hierarchical organized patriarchal systems. They instead propose the image of Jesus as a Liberator, which they feel, is close to their daily-lived experiences. Unfortunately, the male theologians seem to be ignoring or taking long to dialogue with the female theologians.



## Chapter Three

### African Traditional Marriage<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand the bride of Christ metaphor in its African context, the meaning of marriage in ATR must be understood. In chapter one I discussed in brief some aspects of African traditional marriage practices like the ritual of *gũtinia kĩande* among the Agĩkũyũ of Kenya. In this chapter I intend to further this discussion by looking at the institution of marriage in African societies. I begin by discussing the traditional values of this institution, the function it played in the African societies and the various stages that led to marriage. The chapter will also discuss traditional marriage vis-à-vis the incorporation of a young woman into religious life.

#### 3.1 Marriage in Traditional African Societies

Marriage is an essential institution in every human society. It is the recognized social institution, not only for establishing and maintaining the family, but also for creating and sustaining the ties of kinship. Marriage is essential to the development and enlargement of kinship ties, which are a characteristic of African society.<sup>2</sup> Every man or woman who reaches adulthood is expected to marry and bear children. In traditional African society, marriage is considered so important that as part of the puberty rites that usher young people into adulthood, the young people are educated in matters of sex, marriage, and family and thus made aware of the responsibilities of adulthood. Before entering into marriage, then, young people know what is expected of them in terms of their roles in a marriage relationship.<sup>3</sup> Marriage is a requirement of the society, an obligation every man and woman must fulfil, a drama of life in which every man and woman must participate.<sup>4</sup>

Thus principal events surrounding individuals' lives in traditional African society are of great importance. Rites of passage<sup>5</sup> are the main instruments that punctuate individual

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional marriage in many African cultures share some fundamental features.

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Sankofa Pub. Co., 1996), 76. See also, Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>4</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 133.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 11. The phrase "rite of passage" was coined by Arnold Van Gennep in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He proposed a threefold sequence that include rites of separation (pre-liminal), rites of transition (liminal) and rites of reincorporation (post-liminal) as characteristics of rites of passage. In traditional African societies, a rite of passage was a strong educational means of inculcating morals and passing on societal values.

lives. Different ceremonies mark the passage from one stage to another and each stage comes with new responsibilities. As Benjamin Ray puts it, rites of passage create:

A bond between temporal processes and archetypal patterns in order to give form and meaning to human events. This is done according to a threefold pattern consisting of rites of separation, transition, and incorporation. The specific object of the rituals of passage is to create fixed and meaningful transformation in the cycle (birth, puberty, marriage, death) in the ecological and temporal cycle (planting, harvest, seasonal changes, New Year), and in the accession of individuals to high office.<sup>6</sup>

Each rite of passage is very important, hence, elaborate rituals are performed with great care and involve the whole community in order to make a successful transition from one stage to another and to ensure or maintain a peaceful society. Marriage constitutes the most important of the transitions from one social category to another because it involves a change of the woman's family and clan to that of the man.

In traditional African communities, entering into a marriage was a long, gradual process. It did not come at one single moment in time, but came into being in a series of meetings, negotiations, exchanges of gifts, ritual observances, cohabitation, and culminated with the birth of the first child—the longed-for new member of the descent group. Marriages could not take place until there was a proper investigation of the spouses and the family background of the two clans. In essence, a valid marriage consisted of the consent of those involved and their guardians, the handing over of the gifts of the bridegroom's family to the guardians of the bride's family, and the blessings and ceremonies that accompanied the handing over of the bride to the bridegroom's family for their cohabitation. Mugambi discusses some of the processes and their meanings:

Marriage was not merely an affair between two individuals who have fallen in love and plan to spend the rest of their lives together. It is a matter in which the lineage groups, both the man and the woman, are deeply interested. Before a marriage ceremony takes place, it is not unusual for members of one lineage group to try to obtain information about their prospective husband or wife. The purpose of these private or secret inquiries is to enable the lineage group to determine whether the man or the woman is worthy of their child or their relatives. Each group wants to be fully informed about the family background of the man or the woman to be married to their relative: whether there are some hereditary diseases in that family, whether the man or the woman is respectful, whether the man can really look after the woman, whether the woman is morally good, whether her mother was known to be an adulteress, whether the man or the woman is harbouring any secret misdeeds and so on. Marriage is contracted

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<sup>6</sup>Benjamin Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 91.

only after each lineage group has satisfied itself as to the worthiness or the suitability of the man or the woman.<sup>7</sup>

Marriage, therefore, establishes a relationship, not only between the individual spouses, but also between two lineages or clans. It is an incorporation into families. As Magesa explains, the “communities involved share their very existence in that reality and they become one people, one thing, as Africans would put it, so that through their marriage, their families and clans are also united and what is done to one of their members is done to all. By this gesture marriage also means that the partner’s responsibilities are not limited to them alone but have a much wider application. Their own personal identity and identification are equally extended.”<sup>8</sup> In African societies, parents are the ones who had the task of choosing a marriage partner for their children. However, in cases where an individual chooses his/her partner, the parents had the final say. After a young man establishes whom to marry and informs his parents, the elders would take on the duty of investigating the background both of the young man and the woman he intended to marry. The investigations were meant to find out whether any of the spouses of their families had cases of incurable diseases, alcoholism, criminal or antisocial behaviour. It is only when the elders were satisfied that they approved for the marriage process to begin.<sup>9</sup>

Marriage is one of the most powerful means for maintaining cohesion within society and enforcing that conformity within kinship systems, without which social life would be impossible. The social and communitarian character of traditional marriage means that when two communities are bound closely together through marriage rites, certain conditions, such as a rift or enmity between two communities, can nullify a marriage between two people. Enmity between clans, notwithstanding any amount of cordiality and love between the two individuals, can not only nullify a marriage, but can also make it impossible in the first place. The value of marriage is, therefore, communal, and the consent of the couple has validity only in this complementary, social context.<sup>10</sup> Marriage is obligatory for its transmission of ancestral life. Mbiti observes, that one becomes immortal in and through his/her children. One’s name he says “is carried on and not lost, the torch of life is handed down and begins to burn anew, you are rekindled in your children. Through procreation you beat death, you bring

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<sup>7</sup>Mugambi, *The African Heritage*, 78-80.

<sup>8</sup>Magesa, *African Religion*, 116.

<sup>9</sup>Abimbola Wande, “The Meaning and Purpose of Marriage,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 9 (1995): 54.

<sup>10</sup>Magesa, *African Religion*, 119.

together the three dimensions of time: past, present and future.”<sup>11</sup> On the same line, Bujo points out that each person who continues the transmission of life through the covenant of marriage narrates the biography of his/her ancestors and unites his/her own autobiography, thereby conquering death on the level of both the individual and the community. Each child who enters the world keeps alive the memories of the ancestors.<sup>12</sup> This explains why dying without children is tantamount to diminishing one’s life. Abundance of life says Magesa is the reason behind all forms of marriages and unions—they serve to preserve and prolong life, to provide for the ritual fecundity and physical procreation.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.2 Traditional Stages Towards Marriage/initiation Rites

The traditional marriage proceeds by following different stages, which are characterized by the performance of prescribed rites and rituals. Even though the stages vary from one ethnic community to another their intention is the same—to maintain proper order in the preparation of marriage and the marriage itself, for marriage is important in preserving and transmitting the life-force of the community.<sup>14</sup> First, as a preparation for marriage, adolescents undergo initiation rites. The initiation rites, according to Mbiti are “like the birth of the young into the state of maturity and responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> The young are incorporated into the full life of their society through the initiation rites. It is only after the initiation that a person was religiously and socially born into full manhood or womanhood with all its secrets, responsibilities, privileges and expectations.<sup>16</sup> One of the educational purposes of initiation rites is to introduce the young people to matters of sex, marriage, procreation, and family life.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, the society arranges that the youths goes through a period of withdrawal from the society and from home into specifically prepared huts away from the villages. During this time, they receive secret instruction before they are allowed to re-join their relatives at homes.<sup>18</sup> They are also introduced to the art of communal living. Most importantly, they are introduced to adult life and are allowed to share in the full privileges

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<sup>11</sup>Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 234.

<sup>12</sup>Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. McNeil Brian (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 35-36.

<sup>13</sup>Magesa, *African Religion*, 136.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>15</sup>Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 134.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

and duties of their community. They enter into a state of responsibility: they inherit new rights, and new obligations are expected of them by the society. This incorporation into adult life introduces them to the living dead<sup>19</sup> as well as the life of those yet to be born.<sup>20</sup> The occasion also marks the beginning of acquiring knowledge, which is otherwise not accessible to those who have not been initiated. They learn to endure hardships, they learn to live with one another, they learn to obey, and they learn the secrets and mysteries of the man/woman relationships.<sup>21</sup>

#### Choosing Marriage Partner

Traditionally, in many African societies, the parents would arrange marriages for their children. However, the young person had to give his or her consent, which the parents

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<sup>19</sup>John Baptist Odama, *God's Word as Event-Call in Dt. 26:1-11: An Exegetical Interpretation And Pastoral Application To The Lugbara* (Kisubi, Entebbe: Marianum Press, 1991), 26. Quoted in Cadri Diego, "The Development of Small Christian Communities in the Catholic Church and among the Lugbara People of Uganda after the Second Vatican Council: A historical, Theological and Pastoral Investigation" (PhD diss., McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts, Duquesne University, 2007), accessed January 27, 2016. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. Odama explains the ancestors or living dead as follows: "[...] the living dead are still people or persons, human beings with social and moral responsibilities. For the [Lugbara people of Uganda], all the dead kinsfolk of a man/woman are loosely called ancestors, though he/she may not know all the names, but he/she is sure that after their death they are somewhere beneath the surface of the world or some other place. Only those who have been either family leaders or clan leaders, and have been contacted by diviners after death and are found worthy, are often given a symbolic sign of welcome in a home by erecting stones under granaries to mark their presence among the living kin ... The living-dead, especially those who were well-behaved and respected elders are remembered in every major activity of the clan such as marriage celebrations and funerals, especially of elderly people. In daily life they are recognized as the members of the lineage, above all as heads. Formerly they used to have libation from the living members quite frequently. Their past lives as old people, morally good examples, used to be recounted at any gathering of elders or clan members. The living members always considered them as protectors of the clans and of the morality of the lineage. Any signs of degeneration in the clan's behaviour were often considered punishable through illness, epidemics, and other calamities. Similarly on the occasion of burial, if the corpses were not treated respectfully or were buried in an unbecoming manner, they would also take revenge on the living members. It is not uncommon among the Lugbara to find such statements as: 'Our grandfather or grandmother had laid badly in the grave for us.' This means the relationship between the living members and the ancestors is spoiled. Immediate reparation or restoration of the good relationship between the living was always done through the sacrifice of a goat or a lamb. The significance of this was before and after-it must be the norm to live in good relations with living members and the ancestors of one's clan."

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 122.

respected. In other societies,<sup>22</sup> the young people made their own choice and afterward informed their parents. The opportunities for the young to find partners were provided by social gatherings, dances and communal work, and by their knowing other people in the neighbourhood.<sup>23</sup> In all cases, the elders or their intermediaries carried out intensive investigations in order to find out about the background of the boy and the girl.

### Courtship

Courtship is the period where the bride and the bridegroom come to know each other. In the early stages of this courtship, the young man and the young woman would simply visit each other in their homes. Both families would just take it simply as friendship and would not bother much about their relationship. However, as the relationship proceeded, the two families would begin to study the two to see if each fit into their families. In this case, the elders or the intermediaries carried out intensive investigations in order to find out about the background of the boy and the girl. If they were satisfied, the two families began to make marriage arrangements.

### Bride price

One of the most distinctive features of traditional marriage is the custom of paying a bride price. This was more ritualistic both in practice and outlook than a single act of paying the bride price. Emphasis was laid on the ritual itself rather than the price. The practice came after the two lineages or clans or families reach a consensus that the two spouses are acceptable to marry, and that there are no hindrances to the marriage between the two clans. The formal process began with the payment of bride price. This was also not a one-day event, but a process involving several visits.

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<sup>22</sup>Magesa, *African Religion*, 126. Explains how the young people among the Luo people of Kenya choose a marriage partner as follows: "Relationship between sexes in youth is extremely free so young people can get to know one another. There is no stigma for unmarried girls to visit unmarried boys in the latter's hut." Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Agĩkũyũ* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 165, also describes how the young people among the Agĩkũyũ choose their marriage partners. He describes the process as follows: "[...] boys and girls are left free to choose their mates, without any interference on the part of the parents on either side. From the earliest infancy there is a close social intercourse between the sexes, which provides them with an opportunity of becoming acquainted with one another."

<sup>23</sup>Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 104.

After the members of the two families and the clans had been satisfied with the qualities and background of the would-be bride and the bridegroom, they asked the elders to decide on the bride price. These gifts were in form of cattle and goats and were a token of gratitude on part of the bridegroom's family to that of the bride, for their care over her and for allowing her to become his wife.<sup>24</sup>

In many African communities, a woman's labour was highly valued and her departure to another family or clan meant the loss of this labour, therefore the bride price was a highly valued as a compensation for this loss. The collecting of the bride price was not a task of the bridegroom alone, but the whole clan assisted and contributed towards it. Likewise, once paid to the bride's family, it (the bride price) was not just for the bride's father, but it was shared among the uncles and the entire clan. In addition, the bride price received by the bride's family was used in turn, to pay for bride price for their son's marriage. This demonstrates that marriage is an alliance between the two clans. It was an important custom in maintaining a stable family, as Njenga notes:

The stability of the family was enhanced by dowry [*sic*] because it played an important part in cementing marriage relationship. Dowry [*sic*] was a sign of the appreciation of the value of wife. Among the Kikuyu people, if a man failed to pay dowry [*sic*], his wife felt she was not loved by him and felt that such a husband had no rights to give her orders. Since dowry [*sic*] among the Kikuyu played such an important part in cementing marriage relationship, it was hard to carryout divorce even where it was absolutely necessary and it was not considered complete till the dowry [*sic*] was returned to the person who had paid it.<sup>25</sup>

The bride price was, therefore, a mechanism that legally validated a customary marriage and a sign that the two families had agreed to the marriage contract, and that they would now accept one another. The bond that was created between the two families and clans was, therefore, paramount, not only for the new family, but also for the extended family as well as the whole society that benefitted from this social harmony. Bride price was and is still<sup>26</sup> a "binding covenant between the two families and the clans."<sup>27</sup> It forms part of the

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>25</sup>John Njenga, "Customary African Marriage," *African Ecclesial Review* 16 (1984): 118.

<sup>26</sup>The practice of paying bride price still remains a prevalent custom in many parts in Africa, particularly in Kenya. It is paid by most of the Kenya's more than 40 ethnic groups. Marriage is not considered legal unless a bride price has been paid according to the current customary laws in Kenya.

<sup>27</sup>Osadolor Imasogie, *African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press Limited, 1985) 61.

process of the covenant that breaks down barriers between clans and peoples and establishes unions of life, love, harmony, peace, and security beyond certain frontiers.<sup>28</sup>

Marriage rituals provide an opportunity for the community to gather, prepare, and enjoy feasts. This is one way of strengthening community and creates social or communal harmony. Through procreation, the new family in the clan begets children, who replace the dead relatives, and in this way, society is renewed and replenished.

### 3.3 Traditional Marriage Vis-à-Vis Incorporation of a Young Woman into the Religious Life

The preparation for final profession of a religious woman can be compared to the long gradual process of traditional marriage.<sup>29</sup> The key aim of marriage in many African societies was for propagation of the clan. The stability and durability of the marriage union was vital, and thus a careful selection and preparation of the candidates for marriage was carried out. A thorough investigation was made concerning the backgrounds of the prospective bride and bridegroom. Similarly, the journey of becoming a religious sister in a particular order is a long, gradual one marked by various stages. The period in which one becomes a fully professed member in a religious congregation is approximately nine years. Most of the young women begin aspiring to religious life at the age of eighteen, immediately after their completion of high school education. Similarly, the candidates for traditional marriage are drawn from the adolescents—younger than twenty years.

#### First stage: Aspirancy or Candidacy

The initial stages of religious life in a way parallel that of the traditional courtship and engagement. The prospective sisters (aspirants) first begin by developing an interest in joining a religious congregation. Through her local church or in schools, she finds different religious congregations. A prospective sister then moves on and makes several visits to different religious congregation in order to gain general information about them. Once her attention is drawn to a particular congregation, she makes more visits in order to familiarize

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<sup>28</sup>Magesa, *African Religion*, 132.

<sup>29</sup>The preliminary stages towards the sisters' taking of the final vows ("marriage") are not viewed explicitly as a kind of "marriage preparation" in the African congregations. This is researcher's interpretation of them by showing a parallelism between traditional marriage and the sisters being married to Christ.



herself with the congregation as well as establish a relationship with the sisters. The aspirant is to be in contact with the congregation for at least two years. This practice is similar to the traditional young woman who is searching for a marriage partner. The community provided opportunities for the young to find partners through social gatherings, communal work, and by their knowing other people in the neighbourhood. During this period, the aspirant is free, has no obligation whatsoever, and can decide to prolong her contact with the congregation as she learns more about the congregation. Once she is satisfied that that is the congregation she would like to join, she requests admission in the next stage. The congregation on its part studies the aspirant and her family. The appointed sister in charge of vocations makes visits to the candidate's home in order to familiarize herself with the family as well as to learn more about the candidate. This is similar to the traditional practice of investigating the backgrounds of the prospective bride and the bridegroom. This process is distinctive to African congregations and it is possible that there may be an implicit influence from marriage preparations.

The elders investigated if the would-be couple came from reputable clans and families. In their investigations, the elders also sought to know if the couple came from families with histories of witches, or incurable and hereditary diseases. In addition, they also investigated the behaviours of the young man and woman to establish if they had engaged in antisocial behaviours, were criminals, thieves or if they were respectful.<sup>30</sup> For the young man, they investigated whether he was in a stable economic position in terms of property ownership such as land and livestock, and had the ability to provide for his future family, including the in-laws. The characteristics expected from the young woman were that she be morally good, respectful, and industrious. If they were found to be fitting, the two clans entered into a formal engagement and the process of bride wealth began. Similarly, in the religious set up, the vocation promoter investigates whether the aspirant (candidate) is respectful; her motive for joining religious life; what she finds most attractive in it; the influences that determine her interest in wanting to be a religious woman; and if there has been pressure brought to bear on the girl to become a religious. The vocation promoter also investigates the candidate's family background. For instance, her family situation: if parents are living, dead or divorced; if her parents are separated and if so, whether the children were involved in the process; if the parents practice their religion; the standards that the parents

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<sup>30</sup>Wande, "The Meaning and Purpose of Marriage," 54; Joseph Ntepeka, "Traditional Marriage among the Mwera Tribe," *African Ecclesial Review* 22 (1980): 159. Magesa, *African Religion*, 120.

particularly demanded of their children; the methods employed to impose those standards; signs of ill-health in their parents or children; if any of her family members has been in hospital and for what and if there is anything that the girl has found irritating at home. In addition, the vocation promoter investigates if there are crises in the family, if the family is a closely knit group, if there have been any notable changes in the family fortunes, or in their ambitions and goals; if the extended family live with girl or play an important role in her life, if the girl has any serious hereditary disease or disturbed behaviour, ability to cope with the demands of life, and a positive attitude toward work.<sup>31</sup>

Similar to the investigations that precede traditional marriage, the knowledge of these issues helps the congregation to decide whether to accept the candidate or not. Careful investigations of these issues further helps in establishing a stable and a lasting commitment.

## Second Stage: Postulancy

If the aspirant or the candidate is found to be fitting, she is then admitted to the next stage, postulancy, to begin yet another long period of training. Similar to traditional marriage, where the girl was the one to give her the consent to the marriage, the aspiring candidate to the religious life has the freedom and must give her consent to enter religious life. In addition, the consent of the family is paramount. This is not different from international congregations. They too visit the homes of the aspirants and the parents write a consent letter which the aspirant carries with her during the admission day. The international congregations that are established in the home countries of their aspirants also carry out some background check ups on their aspirants. The congregation may not admit the candidate if the parents have not consented. Parental blessings in both traditional marriage and entrance to religious life are highly valued. In most African societies, the living and the ancestors are associated with the well-being of the members of the community. High fertility and survival of children are associated with divine approval and approval by both the living and the ancestors. Conversely, low fertility and frequent sickness and death in children are interpreted as evidence of disapproval from the living, the ancestors and the deity/God. Couples who do not have the approval of their parents fear sterility.<sup>32</sup> In this regard, the congregation takes into

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<sup>31</sup>Directory of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Nairobi (Assumption Sisters of Nairobi) 1986: 38-44.

<sup>32</sup>John C. Caldwell and Pat Caldwell, "The Cultural Context of High Fertility in sub-Saharan Africa," *Population and Development Review* 13 (1987): 416, accessed on April 27, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1973133>. Njoroge, *Century of Catholic Endeavour*, 192, recounts the experience of the Holy Ghost Missionaries with Kikuyu parents over the consent of their

consideration that the candidate has parental blessings to join a religious congregation. After the aspiring candidate is admitted to the stage of postulancy, she continues to familiarize herself with the congregation for a period of at least one year and is left free to leave at any time if she so wishes. The congregation on the other hand can also dismiss her if it so wish. The curriculum at this stage is just general deepening of her Christian life. This is similar to traditional marriage preparation, especially the early stages of courtship when the young man and the young woman would simply visit each other in their homes and the families would just take it simply as friendship and would not bother much about their relationship.

### Third Stage: Novitiate

Another step in the “courtship” of a religious candidate, which is similar to the initiation of the adolescents preparing for marriage, is the novitiate stage. This is a serious step as the candidate learns deeply about the religious congregation she has chosen. The novices study the Rule, the Constitution, the Directory and the Charism (mission) of the Congregation. In traditional marriage, as part of marriage and adulthood preparation, the candidates underwent a period of withdrawal from society, absence from home, during which time they received secret instruction before they were allowed to re-join their relatives at home. They are also introduced to the art of communal living. In the period of novitiate, the candidates undergo a period of seclusion for two years. For the first year, the novices like their traditional counterparts, are directly under their Novice Directress. Traditionally, the Novice Directress would correspond with the wise village women who were entrusted with the duties of preparing the young people, both women and men, for marriage as well as life in the village. Further, during this period of seclusion, the professed sisters are not allowed to interfere with the novices through communication or through extended contact during the novitiate visit. During this period, the novices are taught more about the congregation, its

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girls joining religious life as follows: “The Kikuyu parents expected the Holy Ghost Missionaries to honour the age-old custom of bride-wealth, and the Spiritans were adamant to give it. So the Missionaries found a way to send the girls to the Precious Blood Convent in Bura secretly. The entry in the same journal on October 1, 1931 reads: The parents of the four girls claim that the latter have left without their consent and have been disrespectful to their parents. The basic reason is that the Kikuyu want their daughters to yield profit. Nevertheless, Father Bernhard agrees that the girls should come back and ask for formal permission from their parents to go to Bura. In a meeting after Mass all becomes clear. What the parents want is money. The Father says that daughters should not be treated as goats, and are not for sale. When asked, the girls unanimously declare that they want to leave the village without parental blessings.”

rules and regulations. They also learn the art of communal living. Further, during this period, the novices are meticulously observed and their suitability ascertained. After the end of their time in seclusion, the candidates are incorporated into the congregation by way of making their first profession of vows.

#### Fourth Stage: Juniorate (Temporary Professed Sisters)

This is followed by another period of six to nine years of instruction about the congregation. During this period, the temporary professed are under the guidance of the spiritual directresses or elders who continually counsel them. This is similar structurally, but much longer than traditional marriages preparation. As part of marriage preparations the elderly men and women counselled the young fiancés on matters pertaining their roles as spouses. They kept an eye on the moral conduct of the young couple seeing to it that their marital union was in accordance with the customary teachings.<sup>33</sup> On their part, the newly professed sisters are counselled and helped to deepen their religious commitment to Jesus and his mission. They are helped to become aware of congregation identity and spirituality. Traditionally, this corresponds to the bride and the bridegroom learning and identifying themselves with their new family and clan. In addition, the temporarily professed sisters acquire necessary virtues and skills for the mission. During this period, they are not given offices or undertakings that would hinder them from solidifying their commitment. After this intensive preparation, the sisters are permanently incorporated into the congregation through the rite of final profession. Traditionally, particularly among the Agĩkũyũ of Kenya, the ritual of *gũtinia kĩande* was performed after a woman had cohabited with her husband for a considerable period of time. The performance of the ritual sealed her marriage. She now permanently belonged to that family and clan. Through the final profession, the temporary professed sisters too become permanent members with all rights and responsibilities to their congregation.

#### Fifth Stage: Finally Professed Sisters

The sisters are now considered as adults in the congregation, life bearers, and are now given duties and responsibilities which were not accessible to them earlier. They can now be elected as leaders of the congregation. In addition, they are expected to be role

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<sup>33</sup> Kenyuyfoon, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization*, 25.

models to the young and to be productive in the way of serving all God's people following their spouse Christ who came so that all may have life and have it to the full. The final profession rite like the traditional marriage involves the whole community, the family of the sister who is understood as the bride and the entire region where she has been ministering. It is a public function where the sisters referred to as the bride binds herself to Jesus through the three evangelical vows. Like the traditional marriage, her parents or a member of her family presents her at the altar and she is offered to the church on behalf of the extended family. The finally professed sister and her entire family becomes united with the congregation. Her people becomes one with the congregation and the congregation becomes her people.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The elaborate preparation of the traditional initiates shows the high value placed on marriage in African societies. The religious congregation too undertakes painstaking processes to recruit and prepare girls for their union with Jesus their spouse, a union that will last. This process ensures that girls are drawn from respectable family backgrounds and they come into the congregation when they are already respectable girls. The congregation does not make them good girls (sisters). They are already good girls in the congregation's estimation and that is why they recruit them. They come to the congregation and they are made to pass through the different stages as aspirants, candidates, postulants, novices, temporary professed and final professed, which can be compared to the gradual stages of traditional marriage. Of the five stages, the final profession of the sisters is the most celebrated and ritualized. This is because it incorporates the religious women permanently into a particular congregation. The focus of the following chapter will be a deeper examination of the rite of final profession showing how it can be considered as a form of Kenyan traditional marriage in the light of inculturation.

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<sup>34</sup> It is important to point out that from a sociological point of view, the formation process can be read as social control in terms of gender. This is however beyond the scope of this study.

## Chapter Four

### Consecrated Life as Traditional Marriage in the Light of Inculturation: The Sisters of Emmanuel and Assumption Sisters of Nairobi—Case Study

This chapter presents the results of data analysis. The data were collected and then processed in response to the questions posed in chapter one of this study. Three fundamental goals drove the collection of data and the subsequent data analysis. The first goal was to explore how religious women in Kenya are inculturating aspects of religious life, with special emphasis on profession rites. The second goal was to assess the use of the marriage model among the African religious women to see if they find it as being operative in their lives and ministry and finally to establish how the ordinary people perceive consecrated life in Kenya. The findings of the study are presented below. The chapter consists of the findings and analyses of videos recorded during the final profession ceremony. Four profession videos were analysed. Two were from indigenous congregations— Sisters of Emmanuel and Assumption Sisters of Nairobi and two from international congregations—Sisters of Mercy and Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Mother of God. In addition is my own video taken during my final profession, and my observations of at least six final profession ceremonies of sisters from the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi. To obtain the videos, I requested them from the religious women who I knew had done their final professions. After they agreed that the videos may be used, I requested the Secretary General of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi to collect them and mail them here to Canada.

#### Analysis of Recorded Videos

The final profession is an elaborate event that involves the entire Christian community. It is an event that is characterized by the performance of numerous rituals, songs and dances, and the use of various symbols of traditional marriage. Being a ceremony that incorporates the temporarily professed sisters permanently into a particular religious family, the rite of final profession is celebrated in a manner that parallels that of the African traditional marriage ceremony in many aspects.

#### 4.1 Model of the African Traditional Marriage:

The traditional marriage rituals integrated into the profession rites include:

##### 4.1.1 Negotiation: Presentation by the Parents

The rite of final profession is modelled on the traditional marriage. The ceremony begins with songs and dances. For the Sisters of Emmanuel, the procession begins in the convent where the parents of the professing sisters and their daughters are seated as they wait for the profession ceremony to begin. The convent at that moment represents the home of the brides. A group of Catholic Women's Association (henceforth CWA) members follow, singing and dancing their way to the convent. The theme of the songs is to urge the parents to allow their daughters to undertake the service of the church. The following is a quotation of the lyrics performed:

*Huti karibu kwa nyina-wa-Wanjiku iiii, huti karibu.* [We are knocking at the door of the house of the mother of Wanjiku, oh yes we are knocking welcome.]

*Huti karibu kwa-nyina-wa Nyambura iiii, huti karibu.* [We are knocking at the door of the house of the mother of Nyambura, oh yes we are knocking welcome.]

*Huti karibu kwa nyina-wa-Wanjiru iiii huti karibu.* [We are knocking at the door of the house mother of Wanjiru, oh yes we are knocking welcome.]

*Twoka kuoya Wanjiku.* [We have come to take Wanjiku.]

*Wanjiru hamwe na Nyambura, iiii huti karibu.* [We have come to take Wanjiru and Nyambura, oh yes we are knocking welcome.]

*Niaregeire nyumba, iiii huti karibu.* [The mother of Wanjiku, Wanjiru, Nyambura is refusing to get out of the house, oh yes we are knocking welcome.]

*Nyina-wa-Wanjiru, Murekie Wanjiru.* [Mother of Wanjiru, allow Wanjiru to serve.]

*Ndurekie Wanjiru, Ndumurekie biu.* [Allow Wanjiru, allow her to serve.]

*Niwe twetereire, Ndumurekie biu.* [It is she that we are waiting for, allow her.]

*Nyina-wa-Wanjiku, Murekie Wanjiku.* [Mother of Wanjiku, allow Wanjiku to serve.]

*Ndurekie Wanjiku, Ndumurekie biu.* [Allow Wanjiku, allow her to serve.]

*Niwe twetereire, Ndumurekie biu.* [It is she that we are waiting for, allow her to serve.]

*Nyina-wa-Nyambura, murekie Nyambura.* [Mother of Nyambura, allow Nyambura to serve.]

*Ndurekie Nyambura, Ndumurekie biu.* [Allow Nyambura, allow her to serve.]

*Nĩwe twetereire, murekie Wanjiru.* [It is she that we are waiting for, allow Wanjiru to serve]

*Mumarekie biu,* [Allow them to serve.]

*Nĩ Ngai woigire mwana na nyina matiganage.* [It is God who said a child and a mother  
(parent) must leave each other.]



*Figure 1.* A group of CWA singing a Kikuyu traditional dance requesting parents of the sisters to be professed to allow their daughters to commit themselves to God's service.

*Gĩtiro*, a traditional Kikuyu marriage dance specifically danced by women, is performed. In traditional Kikuyu cultural practice, the female relatives from the clan of the groom sang the praises of their son while female relatives from the clan of the bride sung praises for their daughter. The two groups challenged each other over the trustworthiness of both the would-be groom and the bride. This practice is replicated in this religious ceremony where the members of CWA perform the *gĩtiro* dance in praise of the brides. The dancing takes a couple of minutes as the parents deliberate on whether or not to allow their daughters to commit themselves and serve in the church. The meaning of this performance is to allow the parents be more involved in the religious profession ceremony of their daughters just as they are accustomed to in the marriage of their children. Their willingness to allow their daughters symbolises their consent to let their daughters depart to serve God's people. After they have allowed their daughters, another traditional song is sung by the CWA group to



mark the handing over of the brides (sisters) to the church. This time the song is addressed to the mother-in-law.

*Nyaciara ã hũũ nduume na kaihũri.* [Mother-in-law come out and bring a calabash.]

*Kaĩ utaramenya mũhiki niokire?* [Are you not aware that the bride is here?]

*Kana ndũkũmwenda tugĩcoke nake?* [If you don't want her, we shall go back with her.]

*Kũngũ mũhiki* [Hail the bride. Hail the bride.]

*Kũngũ Mũhiki* [Hail the bride. Hail the bride.]

At this point, one member from the CWA who takes the role of the traditional mother-in-law receives the brides (sisters) and hands each one of them a calabash full of porridge as a gesture of welcome in the church. Traditionally, the mother-in-law welcomed the daughter-in-law with a calabash full of traditional porridge. The figure below illustrates this:



*Figure 2.* Each of the professing brides (sisters) holding a calabash full of traditional porridge.

The presentation of the brides to the church is further ritualized. The bride, who is understood to be the person taking the vows, is presented to the church by her parents and relatives amidst much sorrow and cries from the relatives and age mates. Traditionally, this is a very significant gesture as the Kikuyu society traditionally put emphasis on the bride as a gift. The most precious gift one family would give to another family was the daughter who would be a potential mother of their children; thus, the significance of parents and relatives

handing over the bride to her husband. The deep sorrow and the cries expressed by the parents and the relatives demonstrated their love of one of their family members, since they were not sure if she would be comfortable in the new family and the clan she was marrying into. Furthermore, the bride's family were concerned whether the groom and his family were good people. As discussed in chapter 3, the marriage would not take place if they knew the family the girl was marrying into was not good—it involved a lot of preliminary consultation. This concern is further expressed in the Kikuyu saying, *ũthoni ndũrangarangagwo* (“one does not get too familiar with the in-laws”), which explains why the relatives are overwhelmed by sorrow on the departure of their daughter. Once the bride had moved on to her husband's home, utmost respect was to be shown to the in-laws. The Agĩkũyũ respected the in-laws very much. Their relationship was sacred and just as one would not go to a shrine every morning without a reason and without respect, similarly one was not supposed to get too familiar with the in-laws. In-laws came together whenever there was a ceremony and this was not a common practice. However, whenever in-laws agreed to meet, it was to discuss a very serious matter, for example, one that involved some differences in the marriage relationship of their children. The following Kikuyu saying further confirms this notion: *Ciira mũnene nowa ũthoni ũgĩkua* (serious discussion between the in-laws was when the marriage union is in the verge of breaking up or collapsing). There was otherwise very little to be discussed with the in-laws, and to see them together meant that there was a serious problem between the two families; therefore, keeping a distance from each other was the best option. Whenever they met, a sheep or goat had to be slaughtered to appease the ancestors, who would in turn bless and formalize the gathering. Furthermore, on the part of the groom, if he met with his in-laws it would create an opportunity to be reminded of the bride price that he still owes to them, as the saying goes, *rũracio rũtithiraga* (“one does not technically complete paying the bride price”). Moreover, to arrive at the in-laws' place needed a special arrangement so that they could be aware that the in-laws are coming so that you do not find them naked or off-guard, which could lead to harsh punishment or even breaking off the marriage (*gũkua kwa ũthoni*). If this happened, it would be an abomination even to the ancestors. To be sure, no one would support engaging in a trespass that would cost him the family, the community, and even the ancestors. The solution was to keep a distance, hence *ũthoni ndũrangarangagwo* (familiarity with the in-laws was not encouraged).

This also explains why the lineage of both the bride and the groom made extensive investigations of the background of the family and the clan of the would-be couple. In the case of the religious woman, her parents and relatives are also to be concerned with the

happiness of their daughter in the particular religious family that she is joining. Hence, this traditional practice is replicated in the profession ceremony when the parents are offering their daughters to the church. For the religious women too, the parents seldom visit their daughters in the convents. Visits are done occasionally, especially when their daughters are unwell. Parents would not want to interfere with their daughters' ministries. Sometimes the sisters may be sent far from their home diocese and this too may make it difficult for the parents to visit. However, with the modern technology of mobile phones, parents are able to communicate with their daughters. Also the sisters are entitled to visit their families at least two weeks per year or any other time when there is a function in their homes such as a wedding or a funeral of their extended family members. The figure below illustrates this:



*Figure 3.* Parents and relatives cry as they escort a sister (in the middle) to the altar in a profession ceremony.

#### 4.1.2 Ritual of Beer Drinking

During the beer ritual, the girl gives her father a horn full of traditional prepared beer. This beer is traditionally prepared from sugar cane, honey and *muratina* (a special kind of fruit that gives flavour to the beer). The beer is customarily contained in a gourd and normally served with a Kikuyu traditional horn and it is commonly used during marriage ceremonies). While the in-laws provided the beer in a marriage ceremony, during final profession, the local Christian community provides the traditional beer for the occasion. Before sipping the beer, the father asks his daughter if he should drink the beer, “Do you allow me to drink this beer?” The daughter then assures him and responds, “Father, drink without any fear, I will not shame you.” The father again asks another question for further

assurance, “Are you sure that it will never be charged”?<sup>1</sup> The daughter again gives the assurance, “Father, drink it will never be charged.” The father, having been assured, accepts the beer by saying, “If you are sure that it will never be charged, pour for me that beer I will drink.” The daughter at these words fills a traditional horn with beer and hands it over to her father. After drinking, the father blesses his daughter in a traditional Kikuyu way by spitting on his chest while uttering blessing for his daughter. Spitting some saliva<sup>2</sup> on the chest is a traditional way of blessing according to the Kikuyu culture. It is a rich gesture signifying that the child may now go wherever he or she wishes as he or she has parental blessing.



*Figure 4.* A newly professed sister dressed in traditional kikuyu attire handing over a horn full of traditional beer to her father.

<sup>1</sup>In the traditional Kikuyu marriage practice, under the system where bride price was handed over, the parents and the family of the bride would not accept it and allow the girl to marry a man unless they were reasonably sure that she would remain with her husband. According to L.S.B Leakey, *The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903*, vol, 1 (London: Academic Press, 1977), 754, if a woman left the husband without a just cause and without having been unfairly treated by him, her parents and family became liable to repay the whole of the *rũracio* (bride price). On the other hand, if a man ill-treated or otherwise gave his wife a just cause to leave him, he lost both his wife and the considerable number of livestock that that he had handed over as *rũracio* (bride price).

<sup>2</sup>Saliva is thought in many cultures to have power of life and death just like the word of the mouth. Saliva is something sacred for the Agĩkũyũ. The chest is the guardian of the heart and bank of all treasures. Hence, when the person blessing spits on his or her chest, it means that whatever he or she wish for you is from his or her heart.



*Figure 5. A father spits some saliva on his chest as he blesses his daughter.*

In the traditional as well as contemporary Kikuyu culture, it is common for the parents, especially the father, to drink traditional beer, which is normally offered by the bridegroom's parents when his daughter was marrying. By accepting and drinking the beer, the girl's father affirms his approval of his daughter's marriage. In the same way, by agreeing to give the beer to her father, the religious woman shows her consent to be incorporated into the particular religious family. In addition, it shows the consent of the father and the relatives to let his daughter join the particular religious congregation permanently. Further, in the handing-over element of the profession rite, the officiating priest invites the parents and the relatives to express publicly their agreement to let their daughters serve in the church in which they bless their daughters. This continued involvement of the parents in the profession rite of their daughters reflects the communitarian character of traditional marriage. Marriage was not an affair between two individuals who had fallen in love and planned to spend the rest of their lives together; rather, it was a community affair in which the lineage of groups of both the man and the woman were deeply interested. In the same vein, religious profession is not a private affair of the particular sisters and their relatives; rather it involves the entire community.

#### 4.1.3 The Ritual of *Gütünia Kĩande* (Cutting Shoulder Blade Meat)

In the Kikuyu tradition, sacrificial events<sup>3</sup> were marked by ritual slaughter of sheep or goats. Emphasis was placed on the preparation and consumption of the sacrifices. In the

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<sup>3</sup>Jomo Kenyatta, "Kikuyu Religion, Ancestor-Worship, and Sacrificial Practices," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 10 (1937): 308, accessed February 3, 2016,

marriage ceremonies three parts of the meat were used. These included the goat's ears, the ribs and the shoulder. Culturally, the couple would feed each other with the cooked goat's ears to signify the importance of listening to each other. Traditionally, it was expected of the woman to obey her husband. Therefore, by eating the goat's ear, she confirmed to the community that she was willing to obey her husband. On the man's part, eating the goat's ear showed his commitment to listening to his wife's concerns. On a similar note, the professing sister, in order to become a religious woman, commits herself to a life of obedience and listening to her spouse, Christ, through her superiors. In doing so, she practically seals her vow of obedience.<sup>4</sup> In the Kikuyu traditional marriage ceremony, the husband ceremoniously cuts one of the shoulder blades' meat (*kĩande*) while the wife holds it and this act seals their marriage. The couple also feed each other with the roasted goat ribs. This symbolizes their oneness. During the religious ceremony, the officiating bishop or priest, taking the place of the bridegroom, shares the ribs with the professing sister (bride), thus symbolizing their complete incorporation into the religious congregation which is analogous to the family of the bridegroom.

The shoulder blade part of the meat is used to perform the most significant aspect of the marriage ritual. The shoulder blade meat consists of only one joint and it signifies the union between the husband and the wife. The Kikuyu marriage ritual called *gũtinia kĩande* (literally, cutting or butchering the shoulder blade of the roasted goat meat) is integrated into the profession rite. The ritual is also known as *kuguraria* or *Ngurario* (pouring of the blood of unity) and it is the highest ritual ceremony and an important symbol that culminates the wedding ceremony and seals the marriage. It signifies the permanence of marriage. The ritual is performed after the sisters have taken their vows. Culturally, during the marriage ceremony, the husband cuts the shoulder blade meat (*kĩande*) while the wife holds it. This

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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1155297>, explains the sacrificial practices (events) as “*kũruta magongona* (to perform sacrifices or rituals).” These were sacrifices or rituals which were sacrificed to God and to the ancestral spirits in order that they might give their blessings to the people. Such ceremonies included: sacrifices or prayers for rains, planting ceremonies, harvesting ceremonies, purification of crops ceremonies, marriage ceremonies etc. These were marked by ritual slaughter of sheep and goats.

<sup>4</sup>In most African languages, obedience is synonymous with listening and understanding. According to Kiaziku, *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa*, 159, “he who obeys listens with his or her ear, the organ of the body that symbolizes assimilation. Traditionally, this type of obedience facilitated effective communication. People would communicate with other people typically miles away. A skilled person would make a proclamation by running through the locality to the sound of a drum or gong, which he or she beat at regular intervals as a warning sign, then introduce the message with the words, ‘Open your ears and listen to my voice.’”

public act of *gũtinia kīande* seals the marriage and it is recognised as legal under Kenyan law. In the profession rite, since Christ, the husband, is not physically present, a priest or bishop who is understood as representing Christ in this ritual does the cutting of the shoulder blade meat for the sisters. By undergoing this ritual, the sisters are now considered fully married to Christ. Traditionally, the ritual of *gũtinia kīande* was performed after a woman had been married for a considerable period of time and having stayed in the homestead of her husband providing physical and reproductive labour. For the sisters, the ritual of *gũtinia kīande* is done only during the final profession, when the temporarily professed sisters are becoming permanent members. In a sense, they (temporarily professed) have been in the “marriage” for the last nine years providing service to the congregation. The ritual also signifies the life-long commitment of the person taking the vows and emphasis is placed on the permanent commitment of the sisters to their spouse, Christ, and to their congregation as their new family. When sisters undergo such a ritual, it does not mean that their marriage to Christ is recognised as legally binding, but it is a symbolic way of making the consecrated way of life at home with local cultural practices. It is also the way that the sisters identify with the local people whom they serve in their cultural practices. While the ritual is used during the marriage ceremonies to cement the couples’ commitment, for the religious women, the ritual symbolically affirms the sisters’ vowed commitment to Christ as a form of marriage. The following figures illustrate the above points:



*Figure 6.* A group of Kikuyu elders with adequate knowledge of the ritual of *Ngurario* confirming whether all the specific parts of the meat (shoulder (*kīande*), ears, ribs) for the ritual are available.





Figure 7. A Bishop representing (the bridegroom) cuts the shoulder blade meat (*gūtinia kīande*) while professed sister holds it on the other end.



Figure 8. A priest representing (the bridegroom) cuts the shoulder blade meat (*gūtinia kīande*) while the professed sister holds it on the other end.

#### 4.1.4 The Ritual of Porridge or Gruel Taking

Another marriage ritual that is integrated into the profession rites is the ritual of porridge or gruel taking. A traditionally prepared porridge or gruel is provided and brought in plenty to the profession ceremony. The drink is normally contained in a gourd, carried in an



African basket (*Kĩondo*) and served in calabashes. The sharing of the gruel in the same gourd symbolizes the oneness of the congregation. The carrying of the gourd in the African basket is equally significant. Traditionally, it was the cultural practice of the Kikuyu women to carry gifts in a *kĩondo* when visiting each other. On their arrival, their hosts would empty the contents in the *kĩondo* and would in turn fill it with gifts for their visitors to take with them back home. In the religious ceremony, the religious women understand their life as a gift from God and the services they offer are an attempt to give back to God the life they have been given. In the traditional Kikuyu marriage practice, a newly married woman was provided with porridge to give to her husband and to the guests during the wedding ceremony. The first person she gave the gruel to was her husband in a bid to persuade him to perform the ritual of *gũtinia kĩaunde* which would render her permanently married into that family. She would later serve the guests and others in the ceremony. In the case of the religious sisters, since Christ their spouse is not physically visible, the children and the members of the local community are served with the gruel. This symbolizes the service and the ministry of the religious women. By the sharing of this nourishing porridge, religious women are thus reminded that religious life is all about service. Their call is to serve all people. It could therefore be said that for the religious women to be married to Christ is to be married to the people. The following three figures illustrates this:



*Figure 9.* A professed sister serving porridge during a final profession ceremony.



*Figure 10.* A professed sister serving children with porridge during a profession ceremony.



*Figure 11.* A professed sister serving porridge during a profession ceremony.

#### 4.1.5 Relinquishing Ornaments

After the main marriage rituals of *gūtīnia kīānde* and the sharing of porridge have been performed, the sisters now are considered to have found the lover and husband whom they have been searching for—Christ, in the face of the children and the community present. They are then asked by one of the CWA members to remove all the ornaments and

decorations they have adorned themselves with and give them out to the young unmarried girls and the temporarily professed sisters who are still discerning their vocation.

Traditionally, unmarried Kikuyu young women decorated themselves and wore various ornaments. Wearing ornaments was thought to increase one's outer beauty and it was a mark of good culture. More importantly, it was the way a young Kikuyu woman announced her availability and readiness for marriage. For the religious women, the idea is to emphasize that they have found their beloved, Christ, who in the face of the children and the community members, they should aspire to serve. Further emphasis is on the aspect of detachment from worldly pleasures; they are to raise their hearts above the material things of this earth. The following two photos illustrates this:



*Figure 12.* Professed sisters removing ornaments and handing them over to the temporary professed sisters.

#### 4.1.6 Giving Gifts to the Parents

Another aspect of traditional marriage that is integrated into the profession rites is the giving of gifts to the parents. After the parents have offered their children to the service of the church, they are in turn offered some gifts, *gũthukĩrio kĩondo* (given some gifts in the African basket). This is in line with the Kikuyu cultural practice expressed in the saying *ĩgĩtunywo mwana ñikagĩrio mungu* (“when you want to take away a young one of an animal from its mother, you have to give it some fruits in the feeding box; so that it does not make noise”). In this case, the small gift given to the parents in the African basket is a symbol that the church appreciates the work of the parents in the care of their daughters. Traditionally, the system of bride price compensated for the loss of physical and reproductive labour on the part of the clan of the bride. The clan of the bridegroom, on the other hand, would benefit with among other things, the children that the bride would bear as well as her physical labour. In the religious profession ritual, the token should not be confused with the bride price; rather, it is an appreciation of the work done by the parents of bringing up and caring for their daughters. The figure below illustrates this point.



*Figure 13.* Parents of the professing sisters each carrying an African basket (*kĩondo*) with a small token of gifts given by the church as they bid farewell to their daughters.

#### 4.1.7 Traditional Attire

There is also the use of a traditional dress *nguo ya ngoro* (an upper garment that was suspended by a string from one shoulder) and *mũthuru* (a skirt that was designed so that the bottom part formed two v-shaped tails each to cover a stretch of the legs). Wearing the traditional dress symbolizes the integration of the old and the new ways of living. It also



means that the religious women are not only to live as religious women but also as religious women who are Kikuyus, Luos, Kalenjin's or any other ethnic community for that matter. The traditional dress also signifies that the religious woman is now a married Kikuyu woman who is expected to observe cultural decency by dressing decently. The following three photos shows the professing sisters with traditional attire during a profession ceremony.



*Figure 14.* Professing sisters adorned with traditional attire during a profession ceremony



*Figure 15.* Professing sisters adorned with traditional attire during a profession ceremony



*Figures 16.* Professing sisters adorned with traditional attire during a profession ceremony

#### 4.1.8 Incorporation of Marriage Symbols

The gifts that the religious women are given after their commitment to religious life are symbolic. They reflect various traditional themes. For example, she is presented with: a pot for drawing water, a cooking pot, firewood, broom, cooking stick, winnowing basket, African basket (*kĩondo*), machete and a traditional stool (three- legged). These symbols were used by women in their daily chores and highlight the fact that women are the custodians of the health of the community through their daily contacts with the land and with food crops.<sup>5</sup> Given to the religious women during the profession rite, they remind them of the industriousness of an African woman. In the traditional Kikuyu culture, a woman was not only a mother of her children but also a mother of all the children in the village. On a similar note, a religious woman is given these items as a sign that as an African woman, she should be a mother who feeds the community of the faithful through her services. Her apostolate (work) is to be geared towards giving life to all God's people. The figure below shows the different symbols presented to the professing sister.

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<sup>5</sup>Thuku Kariuki, "The Silent Relevance of African Trans-Family Ethnographies: Realities and Reflections on the African Family," in *The Family in the New Millennium: The Place of Family in Human Society*, ed. Scott A. Loveless and Thomas Holman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 98.



Figure 17. Marriage symbols presented to a religious woman during her final profession.



Figure 18. A professed sister carrying an earthen water pot during a final profession ceremony.

#### 4.1.9 The Traditional Three Legged Stool

There is also a gift of the three or four legged stool. In many African communities, stools played a significant social role. A stool was a ritual symbol of power and divinity.<sup>6</sup> The three-legged stool is a part of the Kikuyu culture and is a sign and a symbol of authority and stability. It was for decision makers and was normally given to an elder. The Kikuyu saying,

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<sup>6</sup>Beryl Mirriam Fields, *Finding Wisdom: Learning from Those Who Are Wise* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2009), 22.



*cira ũyũ nĩũgũikarĩwo njung'wa* (“the magnitude or weight of this case requires that the elders sit down on a traditional stool to solve it—it is not an issue to be rushed”) shows the social significance of the stool among the Agĩkũyũ. Culturally, the person who sat on it was a man or a woman of impeccable character; a person who would pass judgement in a just way and whose decisions were final and binding. For the woman, the stool also symbolized her authority in the home as a mother, a wife, an educator and a counsellor. The stool given during weddings is to symbolize the tasks she will be expected to engage in when sitting; for example, cooking, feeding a baby, or instructing young people through telling stories, proverbs, and riddles. When the religious woman is made to sit on a three-legged stool, it reminds her of her role as an elder; that of making just decisions, especially those that concerns the broader society. The stool also reminds them of their role as educators and as counsellors.



Figure 19. A group of CWA presenting a newly finally professed sister with a traditional three legged stool.

#### 4.1.1.1 African Traditional Basket (*Kĩondo*)

A traditional basket (*kĩondo*) is another symbolic gift that is given during the profession rite. *Kĩondo* is a traditionally Kenyan sisal woven basket. Traditionally, it was used by mothers to carry harvested food from the garden and to hold staple food such as beans and maize. It is a strong symbol and it signifies motherly status, motherly care and motherly responsibility, as well as the protection of propagative seeds.<sup>7</sup> As a cultural practice

<sup>7</sup>Thuku Kariuki, *The Family in the New Millennium*, 98.



among the Agkũyũ people, the mother and other mothers gave their daughters the special gift of a *kĩondo* on her wedding day. This is a living culture practiced in the rural and urban areas in Kenya<sup>8</sup> where most women will take a *kĩondo* (basket) along when going to the garden, or when going to the market to buy groceries or farm products. In both the traditional and contemporary Kikuyu society, whenever women visited each other they used the *kĩondo* to carry gifts/presents for the host. Once the host empties the *kĩondo*, she is expected to re-fill the *kĩondo* with other gifts/presents. When this symbolic gift is given to the religious woman it reminds her that her call is one of service to all people. The gift that she has been given is her life; she has in return to give this life to God through her services.



Figure 20. A group of CWA handing a gift of African basket *Kĩondo* to a professed sister.

#### 4.1.1.2 Song and Dance

The rite of final profession is marked by song and dance. The songs and dances that are performed during this celebration carry a wide range of meaning; some are meant to advise, to celebrate, and more importantly, they carry particular themes of marriage. For example, a song like, *Mwathani nĩa gwĩthurĩre* translated as “the Lord has chosen you” is sung after the sisters have pronounced their vows as a mark that they are now married to Christ. The following are the lyrics:

*Mwathani nĩagwĩthurĩre.* [The Lord has chosen you]

*Ugatuika Muhiki wake.* [To be His bride]

*Mwarĩ uyu wa maitu rĩu.* [My daughter you are now]

*Nĩwarĩkia kuhikĩra Kristu.* [Now you have been married by Christ]

*Na rĩrĩa we agwĩtire.* [When he called you]

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 98.

*Ndũigana kũrega gwĩĩka.* [You never turned him down]  
*Nĩkĩo ũgĩũkire ũmũthĩ.* [That is why you came today]  
*Ũmwĩtegere mbere iitũ.* [To offer yourself to him before us]  
*Na wehĩta mbere itũ.* [And have vowed before us]  
*Atĩ no Yesu wike ũkwenda.* [That it only Jesus that you will follow]  
*Ikĩhumbe thuti yaku.* [Wear therefore your wedding dress]  
*Naũmũrũmũrĩre mũhikania* [And follow the bridegroom]  
*N'ogĩtũrage ũmũiguĩte.* [Obey Him at all times]  
*Wega umaga na mũcii.* [From home comes the blessings]

Similarly, a song, “*Ũka mũhiki wa Kristũ*” translated as “Come bride of Christ” is sung to confirm that the sister is now married to her spouse Jesus who is inviting her to take the crown he has prepared for her.

*Ũka mũhiki wa Kristũ.* [Come bride of Christ.]  
*Oya itunga rĩrĩa.* [Take the crown]  
*Mwathani akũharĩrĩrie* [Which the Lord has prepared for you]  
*Kuma mĩndĩ na mĩndĩ.* [Till eternity.]

Other songs sung during this occasion remind the congregation gathered the importance of adhering to their marriage vows and maintaining peace in their families. For example, the following song “*Ngemi ciumaga nakũ?*” literally meaning “Where do joyful noises or ululations come from?” illustrates the fact that joy emanates from households and from families. In African culture, the family unit is very important and it is the responsibility of both the husband and wife to strengthen it. Thus, “Ululations come from home.” The following is the lyric:

*Ngemi ciumaga nakũ?* [Where do ululations come from?]  
*Ngemi ciumaga na mũciĩ* [Ululations come from home]  
*Wega umaga na mũciĩ* [Goodness comes from home]  
*Mũciĩ nĩguo gĩtugĩ ĩĩ* [Home is the foundation]  
*Gĩakaga kanitha na gĩgaka bururi* [That builds the church and the country]  
*Nĩguo mũthingi wa thĩĩ ĩĩ* [Home is the foundation of the earth]  
*Ngai athondekire omba Adamu na hawa* [That God made when he created Adam and Eve]  
*Muthuri wĩra waku rora mutumia* [Husband look after your wife]  
*Ciana na mũciĩ waku wega* [Your children and your home well]  
*Mũtumia thakaria mũciĩ waku wega* [Woman beautify your home]

#### 4.1.1.3 Local Community Participation

Members of the community participate in the organization of the rituals. For instance, elders with an adequate knowledge of the Kikuyu tradition participate in slaughtering the goat designated for the marriage ritual and conduct the rituals, such as *gũtinia kĩande* (cutting the shoulder blade). Likewise, well respected elderly women participate in the porridge/gruel taking ritual. They are charged with the responsibility of preparing traditional porridge for the ritual. Once the porridge is ready for serving, the women assist and guide the bride on how to serve the porridge. Similarly, these group of elders participate in the profession ritual which include *gũtinia kĩande* and serving porridge to those attending the occasion. John S. Mbiti points out that the participants in the marriage ritual include the living and the dead. He observes that marriage is an existential task in which all are summoned, the living, the departed, and those yet to be born. It is a drama in which everybody is an actor or an actress and not just a spectator. It is a religious duty and everyone in the society is expected to play a role. The community, Mbiti explains, reproached anyone who was unwilling to take his or her part, for such an attitude was understood as an act of contempt, which contradicts the good law of the ancestors.<sup>9</sup> In the light of this understanding, a religious profession is by right a public occasion, which the local community considers an important rite of passage requiring active participation and attendance of the community in large numbers even when a formal invitation has not been extended.

#### 4.1.1.4 Traditional Meal

The profession rite also provides a rare opportunity for the community to eat together. As per the custom, plenty of food is prepared for the marriage ceremony and everybody eats until they are full. In the African context, sharing meals together is an occasion which unites and brings about reconciliation, specifically among members of the same family. Symbolically, people sharing a meal together is believed to communicate life because enemies cannot eat together.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 133.

<sup>10</sup>Damian Kanuma Musonda, "Religious Symbols in Relation to Consecrated Life," *African Ecclesial Review* 39 (1997): 168.

#### 4.1.1.5 Use of Local Languages

Another African aspect that is inculturated in the religious profession is the use of the local languages. These include Kikamba, Kikuyu, Dholuo, Kiluhya, Kalenjin, Luganda and Kiswahili. The various rituals which are integrated into the profession ritual are carried out in the local languages. Likewise, the sisters use their local languages in the pronunciation of the vows. This is aimed at helping the community to understand religious life.

As the culmination of the traditional rituals, two events take place. The first event is the counselling of the newly finally professed sister. In the traditional Kikuyu culture, the newly married woman was counselled by the elderly women. They reminded the wedded woman among other things of her role as a Kikuyu woman. She was now ready to act as a mother, a wife, counsellor, a person who instils morals in the young, a healer, an adviser, and an educator.<sup>11</sup> On a similar note, upon doing her final profession, a religious woman is expected to shoulder the duties and responsibilities of her congregation. Further, through their apostolate (services in education, health care, and social work), a religious woman becomes like her traditional counterpart a mother, a counsellor, an infuser of morals in the young, a healer, an advisor and an educator.



*Figure 21.* A group of CWA giving words of wisdom to the newly professed sister (far right, sitting on a traditional three legged stool) as her sponsor (second from the right, standing) listens keenly.

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<sup>11</sup>Kenyuyfoon, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization*, 26-29.

The second event that culminates the occasion is the offering of prayers and asking for blessings upon the newly finally professed sister that she may live at peace in her new found home and bear forth life. The figure below shows the elders leading prayers and chanting, *Thaai thathaiya Ngai thaai* (Peace we beseech God peace) after each prayer request. These are beseeching words that are directed to *Ngai* (God).



Figure 22. A group of Kikuyu elders offering traditional prayers asking for Gods blessings upon a professed sister who has become a married woman (*nyakĩnyua*).

## Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has focused on the incorporation of traditional matrimonial rites into the profession rites. The final profession rites are clearly and deliberately modelled on traditional marriage ceremonies, and are understood as such by the sisters, the congregations, and the families. The chapter has illustrated how the African concept of marriage is vital in understanding religious life. When religious life is seen as reflecting the high value placed on marriage and procreation it will cease to be foreign and will therefore be more comprehensible to ordinary people. In the following chapter, I will present the interviews with the sisters regarding the state of inculturation of religious life in Kenya. More importantly, the chapter will assess the use of the bride of Christ model among the African sisters to see if it is of benefit to them.

## Chapter Five

### Analysis of the Interview Data

The focus of this chapter is an attempt to analyse the responses of the interviewees to the questions that guided the study. Twenty-one participants were interviewed. Seventeen of them were interviewed through telephone calls while four responded to the questionnaires that were sent via email. The questions were drafted in English but the respondents were free to respond in their mother tongue. Where necessary, the researcher translated the questions into the Kikuyu or Swahili languages. Translation was aimed at making the questions clearer, particularly for those interviewees who requested more explanation.

The participants shared varied experiences which related to five major themes regarding the inculturation of religious life in Kenya, the society's perception of religious life as seen by the religious women and their use of the 'bridal' metaphor among religious women in Kenya. The five core themes included: (i) the perception of consecrated life in Kenyan society; (ii) some of the challenges facing religious women in the society and in the church; (iii) the status given to religious sisters by the people in the society; (iv) the incorporation of aspects of African Traditional Religion (ATR) into religious life; (v) and the use of the bridal metaphor (meaning, empowerment, and suggestions of a different model). I have quoted many of the participants at length in order to preserve the meaning of the rituals as performed and as understood by the participants.

Table 2. Broader categories of the above themes may be classified as follows:

Inculturation	Bridal Metaphor
Aspects of ATR Traditional matrimonial rituals Reflection of African identity	Self-identification Meaning Empowerment Suggestions of different model
Perception of Consecrated Life	
Perception by the ordinary people as seen by the sisters Status given by the ordinary people Challenges facing consecrated life	

## 5.1 Inculturation of Religious Life—The Marital Imagery

In answering the question, “What aspects of ATR have you seen being integrated into the profession rites in your congregation (during and post profession)?” eighteen participants, all from indigenous congregations, pointed out that they have integrated various aspects of ATR into their religious profession and other aspects of their religious life. Two participants hailing from international congregations said they do not integrate, while one participant from an international congregation said they are making efforts to integrate.

Table 3. Responses Collated by Seven Categories: (R = Responses)

1. Traditional rituals R= 14
2. Role of the parents R = 12
3. Use of signs and symbols R= 9
4. Songs and Dances R= 6
5. Rites of Passage R=4
6. Visiting of relatives R= 4
7. African cultures in religious formation R= 1

### Traditional Marriage Rituals

The most prevalent theme was the integration of traditional matrimonial rituals in consecration rites. The major rituals discussed by the interviewees included: the traditional Kikuyu marriage ritual of *gũtinia kīande* also called *ngurario* (literally, cutting the shoulder blade meat of a roasted goat) and the ritual of taking traditional gruel or porridge.

#### 5.1.1 *Gũtinia Kīande* (Cutting of the Shoulder Blade Meat)

In responding to the question on the traditional practices they are integrating into their profession rites, several interviewees stated that they integrate the traditional Kikuyu marriage ritual of *gũtinia kīande*. In the following seven comments, the participants described the ritual of *gũtinia kīande* and how they integrate it into their final profession rites. Sr. Jane Rose from the Agĩkũyũ ethnic community and a member of an indigenous congregation described the ritual at length:

In the profession, we inculturate the cutting of the *kīande*. It is a very big thing especially in the Kikuyu culture where a woman who has been married—it is done when that woman is convinced that she will never leave that home and she will be buried there. So it is done as the final thing when that woman knows that she will never leave that home. In our congregation we inculturate it in a way that if I join the congregation, I will never leave and I will be buried there. It is a deep culture. We have inculturated it and we still practice it today. When we cut that *kīande*, it can only be eaten by those who have done it, though they say it cannot affect people, but there is a meaning in it to show the ones who have not cut to long for it. It is only a person who has undergone such a rite who can even go near it, even in the tradition it happened so that those who have not cut can

have that longing to want to have it in order to belong to that family fully. Those women in the society who have cut the shoulder say in Gĩkũyũ language *ngenjerwo mbuĩ gũkũ* that is, this is the place where I will shave my grey hair. I will never leave that family—you now belong there.

She continued:

The bishop is the one who cut for us, we hold it and he cuts it. We are then supposed to give him the meat, now symbolizing Christ who has married us. In the tradition, it is the man marrying who cuts for the wife who is being married. To show that the wife truly belongs to that family and even she cannot be chased away. Even in traditional society, those women could not be chased away even if she does what or what. They could be built a house like in the entrance if she has undergone such a ceremony. There is nothing which can take her out of that family, even that man cannot chase her away. In case of anything gravely [wrong] she has done, she could be built for her house. She could not be chased away at all under what circumstances. She truly belongs to that family. Even us, we take such a serious rites and even at times it is a tradition.

She added:

The people appreciate it because even they long for that part. Even some people come to see the tradition—you know if you remind people their tradition you really make them belong and they get the meaning of who a sister is. The same way they get meaning of a woman cutting the *kĩande*, they also see us in the same way. When you go to people and tell them, *nĩndinĩrio kĩande* [I have undergone the ritual of cutting of the shoulder blade meat], they understand more that you are married and they take it very seriously. Actually they are very happy and at that time everybody is awakened even if they are tired it awakes them and reminds them of the tradition.

Other participants shared their experiences of how they were integrating the ritual of *gũtinia kĩande* into their religious profession, pointing out its significance in their living of religious life. In their comments the participants expressed the idea that the ritual of *gũtinia kĩande* signifies the sealing of the vows which the members take; shows that the final profession is their marriage with Christ; shows the permanence of their commitment and the idea that they are now full members of their congregations with all rights and responsibilities. The following comments from sisters in an indigenous congregation illustrates the above point. Sr. Immaculate, a member of the Agĩkũyũ ethnic community from indigenous congregation had this to say:

In our congregation, during the final vows, we have a ritual that we do. We slaughter a goat and some part of the meat is used and eaten by those who are professing to seal [the vows]. It is like a sign of sealing what they have professed. And that was what was being done in the olden times by the traditional women. So we do exactly like that and we inculturate it. We have it



in mind that when I make my final profession, I have been married to Christ. So that is our marriage with Christ.

Sr. Naomi from the Agĩkũyũ ethnic community and a member of an indigenous congregation related that:

During the perpetual vows we usually have the cutting of *kĩande*. It was also used in the Kikuyu culture whereby, if a lady was fully married, there was cutting of the shoulder blade meat. To show that now one has become a full member or one is fully married. For us now, one is fully married to Christ and they belong to the church and are full members of the congregation.

Sr. Hilda, a Mũgĩkũyũ and a member of an indigenous community added:

The cutting of the shoulder helps you to remember you belong to that family and you will not go back. It is done after the communion before the final blessings. People appreciate that. They are involved in fact they are even the one who knows what it means. We have some special men who do that explaining what is being done and it is done practically.

Sr. Evelyne, a Mũgĩkũyũ from an indigenous congregation said:

In our congregation, during the final vows, we have the cutting of *kĩande* symbolizing long life commitment of the person taking the vows. The cutting of *kĩande* is symbolic as it was done traditionally. The man, like in the final profession, will cut the *kĩande* [shoulder] to show that he has accepted the wife and the wife is now permanently married. So it coincides very much with the rite of *ngurario* in our Kikuyu culture. We cut *kĩande* and the bride also eats the ears. This was done in the tradition which means that they will be listening to each other. They also eat the ribs to signify that they have found their own rib.<sup>1</sup>

Sr. Annette also an indigenous Mũgĩkũyũ sister added:

Cutting of *kĩande* we have in our congregation and also sharing of porridge, a sign of hospitality and generosity. To cut *kĩande* is to show that one is fully

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<sup>1</sup>The Kikuyu traditional idea of eating ribs of roasted goat to signify that a man or a woman has found her marriage partner does not originate from the “Genesis tradition.” In the Kikuyu tradition, when animals were slaughtered for ceremonial purposes, different parts of meat were assigned according to age and sex as per custom. In this case, ribs (*mbaru*) was a special meat not allowed to unmarried women. Unmarried woman could not eat ribs because she was not considered as mature. Once the woman is ritually married through *gĩtinia kĩande*, which symbolizes the act of being cut off from her biological family, and to be united permanently into the new family of her husband, eating ribs therefore meant accessing new rights and privileges. Eating ribs was a rite of passage in the stages of marriage. The woman was no longer a girl. Ribs were meant for elders and married women. The system of paying bride price which was done at certain levels or stages for it was not technically completed, allowed one to eat things one could not eat formally in terms of acquiring new responsibilities.

married to Christ; wearing of the traditional attire and adorning the way an African woman used to adorn herself.<sup>2</sup>

Sr. Miriam, a Mũgĩkũyũ from an indigenous congregation related that:

*Kĩande* even in Christianity is accepted because it is a sign of acceptance to get married. When one gets married, before she gets married it is when people are called and they come as family and friends and a goat is slaughtered and there is a part that is taken, a shoulder, so the husband is given to cut for the lady and the lady when she eats that meat, she has accepted that man. The elders, the parents, friends and children are there to see the lady accepting the man. And that is when they are given beer. When the shoulder is cut, the father will now drink the beer so that he can show the beer of the child that this child has started to go.

She continued,

To the religious life, this comes when we are doing our final profession. We also do like that because we have also called people and we want to show them that we have accepted Jesus Christ as our spouse. And during this time there is a special dress which is worn *nguo ya ngoro* literally [the dress of the heart] signifying love. Now at this time the girl has become completely a sign of a new person who has accepted the husband. Now for the religious is when we are accepting Jesus to be our spouse for life. That is when we do that.

It is clear from the above discussion that the interviewees, through the traditional ritual of *gũtinia kĩande*, perceive themselves as married women (*Nyakĩnyua*).

#### 5.1.2 Drinking the Porridge or Gruel

Drinking traditional gruel or porridge was another common theme that emerged among the participants. This ritual is integrated into the profession rites. Sr. Hilda praised the ceremony as really beautiful and explained that in the serving of the porridge, there are usually some elderly women who explains to the sisters what to do, and the porridge which is

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<sup>2</sup>This is a living Gĩkũyũ tradition. There is a certain kind of cultural awakening among the Agĩkũyũ community and most couples among the Agĩkũyũ of Kenya regardless of their Christian denominations are preferring to have traditional marriage ceremonies and later on have a Christian wedding in their churches. Others who have already done a Christian wedding are in addition doing a traditional marriage (*Ngurario*). Wegh, *Understanding and Practicing Inculturation* 42, views this duality of marriage in the Catholic Church as a result of the Church's view of traditional marriage as less satisfactory form of marriage. Because of this duality in marriage, many African Catholic theologians (Shagboar Wegh 1994, Benezet Bujo 1992) are in consensus that marriage is a burning issue for the Catholic Church in Africa. To tackle this problem, they have encouraged inculturation, a process which is hoped to bring together traditional and church marriage ceremonies to avoid duplicity and costs. Wegh suggests a creation of African Christian Rite of Marriage—local rites for specific ethnic groups. On his part, Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 115, sees the need of integrating marriage customs and usages into the Christian tradition as a way of creating genuinely African Christianity.

usually prepared in plenty is served in calabashes. Some of the participants also stated that sharing porridge illustrated the type of service they will offer to the new family they have married into as was practiced in the African tradition. For other participants, this ritual symbolizes the unity of the members, sense of belonging, and virtues of generosity and hospitality. Sr. Jane Rose described her experience of the ritual thus:

The porridge is also taken because you cannot separate the eating of the meat and the drinking of the porridge. The porridge is taken by all to symbolize unity. The *kĩande* cannot be cut without the porridge. The man marrying you may refuse to drink that porridge, so he pretends; even, like now the bishop is the one who cut the shoulder and we have to soothe him to drink [the porridge]. We really inculturate it and also he pretends like that Kikuyu man who could be refusing to take that porridge. When he accepts, [to drink the porridge] he has really accepted now you belong [to the congregation].

The following responses express other interviewees' thoughts on the meaning of the porridge ritual. Sr. Immaculate had this to say:

During the final profession there is the porridge that we share, those who are professing they share among themselves and then share that porridge with the people who came to witness the marriage in the name of Final Profession. We share porridge because we believe that, like the African woman, you were supposed to be very generous and hospitable. In the same way as a religious woman who is married to Christ, I should be generous and hospitable to people.

Sr. Annette added:

There is drinking of porridge as a sign of sharing by the people. Also parents offering their daughters as the bride of Christ like the way it was done during the marriages. The local community in Murang'a diocese appreciate and comes to celebrate. I have not heard any complaint [about the ritual] from the Christians.

### 5.1.3 The Role of the Parents

Another common theme that emerged from most of the participants is the role of parents in the rite of profession. Keeping in mind that the ceremony of religious profession can be equated to their own marriage, most participants mentioned that their parents escort them to the altar just like in the tradition where parents gave their daughters to the bridegroom. The following comments illustrate this point: Sr. Miriam said:

According to our final or any other celebration that we make, we do not also forget to invite our parents. The parents are the ones that take their daughters to the altar to offer them according to the desire or the consent of the daughter. So the church receives the gift from the parents. So, that implies that like the bride is given to the bridegroom in marriage, so this is our marriage to Christ.

Sr. Faith a member of the Agĩkũyũ ethnic community from a local congregation stated:

My congregation goes with the signs of time in order to update ourselves with changes which would be meaningful to our life and responsibilities entrusted to us. For this reason, ATR has been integrated into the consecration rites, by involving the parents by giving them their consent for their daughters to join a certain congregation, also taking part in presenting sister [their daughter] to the altar during the religious profession.

Sr. Annette shared her experience:

We have the presentation by the parents where they are appreciated and they are given something, *gũthukĩrio kĩondo*. This is different from bride price. It is an act of telling the parents thank you for having surrendered your daughter to come to serve. That is appreciating the parents while escorting them as they go home after celebrating their daughter committing herself to the Lord.

The above discussion illustrates how the parents are given a prominent role in the final profession rites of their daughters just as they are in the marriage ceremonies of their children.

#### 5.1.4 Signs and Symbols

The theme of symbols and signs came up during the interviews. Most participants mentioned the traditional symbols such as the dress, the crown, the African basket, the cross, the broom and a pot as symbols used in the profession ceremonies. Sr. Faith emphasized that in her religious community, sisters are encouraged to carry something (in an African basket) with them whenever they go out to visit. Sr. Violet, a Mũgĩkũyũ from a local congregation, explained that some of the gifts given like the *kĩondo* reflect the role of a traditional Kikuyu woman. Similarly, Mary Agnes, a member of the Kamba ethnic community from an indigenous congregation, pointed out that these symbols are tools and signs of future mission. Sr. Evelyn also reported that the novices and temporary professed sisters in her congregation dress up like the traditional Kikuyu girls by dressing up in a *Kanga* or an African garment and decorate themselves with African beads. Sr. Jane Rose expressed herself thus:

We also wear traditional dress *mũthuru* in profession and *hangi* [traditional earrings]. So when people saw us coming out of the house, they were so excited and even they imagined that Kikuyu girl getting married. It becomes such an excitement, people remember and it really makes them one with the celebration because when we appear like that they really see a Kikuyu woman and revisit the culture; you know culture builds people. It becomes such an excitement and people are now able to understand the profession in a deeper way and they associate it with marriage because we are got from the house like the Kikuyu girl used to and now we go in procession. We inculturate it that way. We are got in the house and then we join the procession, we find the little children, the women and we also dance and that is inculturation in another way because we sit together with the people dancing so it also becomes a very big mark for us.

Sr. Deborah, a member of the Luhya ethnic community from an international congregation had this to say:

I am not from a local congregation but as a Kenyan we are really trying to bring in a Kenyan-like traditional culture in our celebrations. We are really searching for it because being with the missionaries they want Kenyan sisters to live like them. Like recently we had a profession and it was pure African where parents will bring the sisters to the altar, parents giving gifts like brooms or a pot just to try to bring in the culture into our celebrations. Though it is not easy, it is really a challenge to bring in the African concept in a missionary community.

Sr. Rose John, a member of the Luo ethnic community from international congregation shared her thoughts:

There is a crown, this is the crown given to the first wife in the African tradition (the first wife crown) to show that she was the first wife. This is also done in the religious life today. If I take myself as the first wife of Christ, I have been given that priority in my life. Traditional ululations symbolized joy when a girl was presented to her husband during the marriage ceremony. Likewise, the moment a sister pronounces the final vows, ululations erupt automatically from the congregation.

#### 5.1.5 Songs and Dances

Several participants mentioned the use of traditional African dances in their celebrations. For example, Sr. Jane Rose pointed out that in her congregation they encourage Kikuyu traditional dances like *gĩtiro*. She said:

We have also dances, like we have *gĩtiro*. Not all dances but *gĩtiro* we encourage it in the congregation because it really reminds people of a Kikuyu woman dancing. So they have *gĩtiro*, they sing it traditionally, the women wear *hang'i* (traditional Kikuyu earrings), they also wear *mũthuru* (traditional Kikuyu dress) and they wear the necklaces. So when they appear before the people because they come to dance in front, it really makes people be excited when they see. *Gĩtiro* is a dance sung by women in the old times, so in the celebration when we sing it, people become alive and they really know what it is. The celebration does not end there [...] they dance for her, give her gifts and this shows that our African cultures exist in our religious setup.

#### 5.1.6 Rites of Passage

In this theme participants compared the traditional rites of passage with different stages in religious life. Sr. Dorothy a Mũgĩkũyũ from an indigenous congregation observed that:

After profession you are now made like the woman at home. You are given responsibility, like the community you become like a woman at home. Even the expectation of the people and the entire congregation becoming a real woman and given responsibilities. It is also a rite of passage, after going through the formation like in the traditional African society, then there is that rite of passage done on them

like marriage—I feel again that it is a rite of passage in the church. After following the postulate (baby), novitiate taken as child, the temporary professed like the youth and finally professed taken like a woman.

Sr. Ruth, a Mũgĩkũyũ from an indigenous congregation stated:

For the preparation of the sisters for the final profession, whereby like the traditional culture there is the issue of seclusion and preparation, like in the traditional African people would be secluded. In the congregation when people are preparing for the final profession, there is seclusion and separation that takes place.

Sr. Terry a member of Kalenjin community from an international congregation stated that in religious life there is the way they practice initiation rites where they have aspirants, postulants, novices. She explained that just as in African communities there was rites of passage where people were initiated to start a new life, they too they apply initiation rites in their religious life.

#### 5.1.7 Visiting the Parents

Many participants indicated that they had visited parents prior to pronouncing their final vows. This visit was aimed at involving the parents in the preparation of their daughters' final profession ceremony. This practice is replicated from the traditional marriage practice where the bridegroom's family visited the family of the bride in order to make marriage arrangements. The following comment by Sr. Jean, a Mũgĩkũyũ from a local congregation, illustrate what the process involves.

In my own congregation there is that visiting, if a sister is saying her final vows, you find that there is the visiting of the family before time to make the parents aware of what is going to happen, the role they are expected to play and they can ask questions and clarifications. It is as if you are going to ask for marriage from the parents.

Sr. Mary Agnes from the Akamba ethnic community of Kenya and a member of a local congregation said:

Then another aspect you find some part of our country, the Christians can arrange from that particular parish the sister is coming from, they arrange to visit my family with a lot of gifts as a kind of token to them because they are taking the part of the church, as if it is the church going to visit my family and give them these gifts as a kind of asking a hand of marriage from them. This event is known as *kwitya mwana* (asking for the child).

There is also a visit or an extension of the celebration to give the local church community an opportunity to celebrate with the professed sister. This extension is like a repetition of the

actual profession ceremony whose focus is thanksgiving for taking such a bold step. Sr. Jean explained:

[A]fter the consecration day, the religious [sister] looks for a day to go back home for thanksgiving mass so that the people who were not able to attend the ceremony where it was can join her in thanking the Lord and you find a lot of tradition is done because she is at home. Now even with the old people who were not able to reach where the celebration was can celebrate and even make a traditional dress for her to put on like the old time people used to wear. When she goes to her home where there is the thanksgiving mass, you find there is the traditional porridge and there is a dress made particularly for her with a certain colour and it has its own design not like any other dress. And there is the slaughtering of a goat where the sister cuts *kĩande* with somebody selected from the church. She has now married the church completely.

In general, most of the participants who reported having integrated matrimonial rituals into their profession rites were from the indigenous congregations. Two participants, Sr. Lisa a member of the Kisii ethnic community of Kenya and Sr. Terry both from international congregations reported that in their congregations they did not inculturate the religious profession. Sr. Deborah who is from an international congregation said that they were trying to bring Kenyan traditional cultures in their celebrations. For instance, being escorted to the altar by the parents, giving of gifts like pots, brooms etc. However, she observed that it is not easy to bring African concepts in a missionary congregation for most of the missionaries would want the Kenyan sisters to be like them.

## 5.2 Religious Sisters' Identification with the Bridal Metaphor

The aim of this section is to assess the perception of the use of the bridal metaphor among the Kenyan religious women. The questions in this section therefore seeks to establish whether religious women perceive themselves as brides of Christ, what it means to them, and if they find the phrase bride of Christ as being operative in their lives and in their ministries.

To the question (a) "Do you consider yourself as a bride of Christ?", eighteen participants out of the twenty one said they considered themselves as brides of Christ, while 3 participants stated that they did not view themselves as brides of Christ. The following statements illustrate their responses to the question. Sr. Jane Rose said: "I consider myself married to Christ because now I find that like that traditional woman, this is my home and hopefully I will die here. It did not take me a day or two to come to who I am, it took years to discern, to reflect before I declared it." Sr. Mary Agnes said: "Yes. That is not something to discuss about ... I consider myself married to Christ in the sense that He has called me,

helped me to say yes in dedicating my whole life to Him in the service to His people.” Sr. Dorothy had this to say:

Yes, I consider myself as married to Christ because I believe and trust with myself. I am married to the church—the church symbolises Christ. So I believe that I am a Spouse of Christ.

Sr. Annette stated:

Yes. By the fact that I am consecrated person, I am married to Christ. One day my people commented something, which is really touching to me. When a finally professed sister pronounced her final profession or vows, Christ accepts that consecration. I belong to him. Christ has accepted me, I belong totally to him. I am married to him, which is my conviction.

Sr. Deborah said:

Yes spiritually being a spouse of Jesus is my vocation. It is deeper conviction that this is the way the life I choose and it is my call. Though sometimes when I am asked about it, it is not easy to explain to people that I am married to Jesus. It is inside me I know myself.

Three participants did not consider themselves as brides of Christ. Sr. Violet from a local Kenyan congregation preferred the model of Servants of Christ, rather than bride of Christ, pointing out that there is much in marriage in which she is not a participant. She reported:

In literal sense of marriage, there are a lot in marriage that I am not a participant. Instead, in the external world, when you talk of marriage, you expect a physical person. I would call myself more a servant of Christ than the bride of Christ. An intimate friend of Christ.

Sr. Joan a Mũgĩkũyũ and also one of the oldest sister in a local congregation, felt that marriage to Christ is “more” marital because the woman gives up everything to be devoted to him, whereas in human marriage, the wife gains property as well as a husband. She put it thus:

It is even more of a marriage because you know when a woman married, she acquired a title [deed] of land (*shamba*) and had her own land (*shamba*) and have a say on that *shamba*. But by being married to Christ, I offer myself fully...everything, the soul, the heart and body and I don’t have anything to keep for myself and say it is for myself. But when a woman is married to a man she can say so. But to Christ, you are really free—you don’t have anything of your own which you can say this is my own.

Sr. Lisa from an international congregation felt that the term could apply to women religious but wondered how religious men would fit into the bridal metaphor. She said:



I do not consider myself married to Christ. One thing is this, because when I say that I am married to Christ, I am not only talking of religious women, we have our brothers who are religious brothers, and religious priests. So when I say I am married to Christ as nuns what of our brothers, are they too married to Christ? I consider myself as a servant of Christ rather than a bride of Christ.

From the above responses, most religious sisters identified themselves with the bridal imagery. There was no particular difference between sisters in African congregations and international congregations in their attitudes to the bride of Christ metaphor. In response to the question, “What does being married to Christ mean to you?” The following themes emerged: Total self-giving to Christ; spiritual relationship; mission or service to humanity; sacrifice; vocation; being set apart; submission to Christ; and someone to depend on.

Eight participants understood themselves being married to Christ as giving themselves totally to Jesus Christ. Sr. Naomi said:

It means that I have given my time, gifts, and my life fully for the sake of Christ. It means that I have offered my whole life to Christ for the service of the church and that I will never get married to any man—earthly.

Sr. Miriam had this to say:

This is to say that I love Christ. I cannot explain to you what it is because it is something, which is in the heart, a desire to serve and to live for him. My total self-giving, surrendering my love to Christ that I will serve him and I give my life totally every day. Whatever I serve is for Christ.

For Sr. Risper, a Mũgĩkũyũ from an indigenous congregation, it is to be totally consecrated to Christ and to bear witness to him. Sr. Joan too understood being married to Christ as being one with him alone as all she can trust and giving her life totally to him. Sr. Jean shared her thoughts:

It means to me that the whole of my life I have given to him for his service in the church. Which is a free choice, nobody forced me to do it and so I if nobody forced me I will try to live that life it means a lot to me.

Sr. Hilda added:

It is to remain focused and to love him in undivided heart. If I have given myself to this person, I want to remain focused to him and I want to love him with undivided heart.

Sr. Terry related that to be married to Christ means to give oneself totally to Christ. This she said enables her to have more time to be with him in prayer and it also helps her in her apostolate in that she able to meet the needs of the poor and the unfortunate. Some

participants understood being married to Christ as a spiritual relationship. Sr. Risper had this to say:

Married to Christ means a spiritual relationship that exists between me and Christ. Like the ordinary understanding of marriage, a couple will always be together, be concerned for each other, work together and so forth, and so is my relationship with Christ. This is however a matter of faith. One needs to have strong faith to accept and visualize this notion. Experience has taught me that some of these issues can only be lived and experienced to have a meaning otherwise it remains a topic for discussion with no conclusion. From the African point of view, there is no marriage with no children and this will complicate it is viewed in the human level since in my marriage this is on spiritual level.

Sr. Faith added:

To me, I see that Jesus Christ holds my life. He is my provider, there is also the fulfilment and satisfaction of my desire from him. I belong to him as I am contented. I am still in his heart. I don't have any other person. I am part of him, he is part of me, and so with Christ I am also a sufferer because I have given my life for him.

Sr. Rose John said:

Being married to Christ, I would compare it with someone who is married to her husband. Instead of looking for a partner to confide with, I confide with Christ who will never let me down. Again I consider myself married to Christ because I am faithful to him.

Other participants understood the marriage as being submissive to Christ. Sr. Immaculate felt that to be married to Christ is to be submissive to him just like an African woman who was totally submissive to her husband. She explained that being married to Christ also means to be committed and faithful to Christ as her husband just like that African woman. For Sr. Dorothy it means total submission to the will of the church and total submission to Christ following the vows and being submissive to the will of the church. Sr. Mary Agnes understood marriage to Christ as sacrificing human marriage and family. Other participants interpreted marriage to Christ as having a person they could depend on. Sr. Annette said:

Being married to Christ means that I have heard the voice, I have responded and I continue to respond to it and I embrace religious life to imitate him. I want to follow him and live for the sake of his kingdom. And it also means that I belong to Christ and I am to depend totally on him what to do. He is the one guiding me because I belong to him.

For Sr. Violet it means embracing humanity and those in need as her own family and children; she also understood it as a total abandonment to his [Christ's] mission with undivided love. It also meant marital abstinence for her. Sr. Immaculate added:

It means that I help Christ in his mission just like the way an African woman would assist and support her husband in the mission. I feel I have a responsibility to support Christ in his mission and we have only one mission—the salvific mission. So I take that as a responsibility to show love and compassion to his people and that is supporting Christ in his mission.

Few participants understood the marriage metaphor as a vocation and being set apart. Sr. Deborah said: “It means being faithful to my vocation in my call as a religious and being with Jesus every day, hearing from him.” Sr. Faith added: “it means being set apart for him only and being faithful to the commitment I made to him on the day of my religious profession.”

The above discussion indicates that the participants understand being married to Christ as a spiritual relationship to Christ. To the question, “Do you experience the status of bride of Christ as empowering to your life and ministry?” all eighteen respondents who identified with the bridal imagery affirmed that the status empowers them. Several themes emerged from the responses which included: availability for service; mission; and where they find solace. On the availability for service, Sr. Jean had this to say:

Yes I do because I have no ties preventing me from doing the ministry I am given by the church through my congregation. I am also able to be sent anywhere the congregation needs me and it is through my consecration because if I am not given an appointment I cannot be able to live the life.

Sr. Miriam added:

This is the experience that makes my life to be very simple because I see I am in the hands of God and because of the love I have for him automatically I serve without reservation waiting for a crown from Christ. I feel that I am happy because you know if you are not happy you cannot serve. Christ has given me that happiness because I have accepted his invitation to accompany him all through my life.

With respect to the second theme, zeal for mission, participants expressed themselves as follows. Sr. Risper had this to say:

Oh yes, the status of being bride of Christ empowers me in life and ministry. Like I said earlier only in the realm of faith can this marriage have meaning or be understood. Therefore if this status does not empower me I would never have the energy or the zeal for the ministry like I have. It is in knowing that I have a certain status that gives me the power to work not any human incentive or benefit can motivate me for the ministry that I am involved in.

Sr. Deborah stated:

Yes, that is where I get my vital energy, like in my life, in my ministry I cannot live my ministry without the power of Jesus because I believe that if I am called, then I need to work towards it—like perfecting myself in Jesus in my life and also in my ministry.

Sr. Evelynne shared her thoughts:

Yes, when I go to teach, I feel that there is something that pushes me because I don't go to teach because of money or anything else because it is a ministry and the service that I am going to teach but the basis of that is my being a bride of Christ. So I am going to do it for him. I do it because of him and he empowers me because anybody can teach, the people we teach with can even teach better than me, but he is my driving force.

Sr. Naomi added:

Yes, because as I work I always ask Christ to work together with me and that I really work hard in that whatever I am doing just like if I had gotten married, I would have done the same. So I work fully—what I am expected to do like a responsible woman.

With regard to theme three, finding solace when faced with difficulties and challenges, Sr. Hilda related:

It really empowers me a lot. What I do every morning, I know I cannot be able to do anything without him. And I usually ask him to direct me to what I will do that particular day. I reflect with the gospel every morning and at the same time before the day ends I evaluate myself and I how I have lived the day, what did not go well. Sometimes when I feel that I am not able and I need some extra power which is really a mystery which I cannot be able to get a particular task which is difficult for me to handle, but I find myself doing. I cannot be able to say, I feel empowered.

Similarly, Sr. Immaculate explained how she found solace in the metaphor:

Yes, this has to do with my life now because I am convinced that Christ is my all. Christ is my husband and my all. His presence in my life as a husband has been helpful in my life especially when I am struggling with one thing or the other I always experience his comfort, his consolation and encouragement. So these are the moments where I have really experienced the presence of Christ as my husband.

The above statements reveal that most participants felt empowered by the bride of Christ metaphor. Responding to the question, “If asked to suggest a different model from the bride of Christ, what would you suggest?” Ten participants reported that they would not change their status as brides of Christ, while eleven participants suggested different models.

Those who chose to retain the bride of Christ model gave varied reasons for their choice as indicated in the following statements. Sr. Faith had this to say:

To suggest a different model from the bride of Christ as asked, I would also ask, what would that different model which would be equal or surpass the model of denying oneself all that is considered to be the best for God's sake?

Sr. Miriam added:

I think I would not chose another model because I am contented where I am. All the same if not that I have condemned those who have got married, because there are couples who are very faithful, their commitment in marriage, they are also very prayerful people. They are models within the church.

Similarly, Sisters Deborah, Jane Rose, Mary Agnes, and Ruth said that they were contented with the bride of Christ metaphor. Sr. Deborah felt that she has been taught from the beginning that sisters are brides of Christ and hence there is no need for another model. Sr. Jane thought that the bride model is enough. For Sr. Mary Agnes, sisters should remain as brides of Christ for they have given themselves to him. Sr. Ruth felt that religious sisters had nobody else apart from Christ and that his love would help them a lot.

Eleven participants suggested different models as follows: co-creators, companions; servants of Christ because we are stewards; Christ love; friends of Christ; light of Christ; a partner of Christ; Christ my all; virgin, because sisters have made themselves virgins because of Christ; The beloved of Christ because I have experienced that love. He has loved me unconditionally; bride of the church, and soldiers of Christ.

The above discussion shows that the sisters identify with the bridal metaphor and it empowers them in their ministry irrespective of the kind of congregation they belong to.

### 5.3 Perception of Ordinary Kenyans on Consecrated Life as seen by the Sisters

This section investigates the experiences of religious women with the ordinary people. The following themes were raised by the participants: lack of proper understanding of religious life; life wasted; religious habit; expectations; procreation; respect and support.

#### Theme 1: Lack of Proper Understanding of Religious Life

Several participants reported that there was a lack of proper understanding of religious life by ordinary people. Statements like the following were used by the participants to indicate a lack of understanding of religious life by the ordinary people: How come you never got married?; How do you manage?; Are you sure you will make it?; Sister can I marry you?; Can I marry you, you can be a good wife?; Have you brought money? What a waste!; Why are you saving money?; You don't have children to feed why bargain?; Sister I will give you

a baby! The following comments further express the experiences of the sisters. Sr. Jane Rose had this to say:

They think we are foolish and even they question whether you are living what you have been asked even by the relatives. They even question, how come you never got married? That is the problem they even interview you and even wonder. It is beyond them so they cannot understand. They don't understand and even men can disturb you even after seeing what has been done [*gũtinia kĩande*]. Because they simply know the man you have married is not visible. So they become a problem also even when they see your profession they also come to you and tell you it cannot be.

Sr. Hilda added:

There are those who are very friendly and there are those who tend to discourage you because they will ask you, how do you manage? Even when I was joining there are those who will ask you, are you sure that you will make it? There are others who don't talk to you, probably those who want children and they desired them but they did not. There are those who had decided to join then they decided otherwise, you will find them avoiding you I find this because I stay in my own parish and I am with my own people. That is why I am talking like that. There are those who consider you as a rich person. They will expect you to share something with them. Every time they see you going home they ask, *umeleta pesa?* (Have you brought money?) So it becomes very hard. Anytime they see you, because I pass there near, the sisters may tell me, let us drop you home with the car. They expect that you have taken a lot at home.<sup>3</sup> They view you as rich—meaning me being a religious I am rich.

Sr. Annette said:

Some interpret religious life as wastage of time. They will tell you, you are wasting your time, you are strong, and you can give birth. Some are not positive, they think I am not supposed to bargain when I am buying something. I have heard comments like, you don't have children to feed, why bargain? Why are you saving money? They don't expect me to fight for my rights.

Sr. Deborah shared her experience:

The *matatu* people (those in the public transport) do not respect sisters at all, like here in Nairobi, when you get into a *matatu*, it is not the way it used to be where somebody would stand up for the sister to sit, nowadays you will stand. That feeling that these are religious we need to respect them, it has really faded especially in the towns. In the rural areas the respect is there, they even stand for you to sit. In the urban areas it has really disappeared. The sisters have to work

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<sup>3</sup> There is a tendency among the people to see religious persons as rich people. This view stems from the fact that their livelihood is far much better than that of their own people. Most religious congregations own much property such as costly vehicles, big and modern houses, and their members are far more educated than their family members. The impression that people get from this type of lifestyle makes them view religious as rich.

to bring back the respect people had especially in the urban areas where people used to see sisters as people who have been chosen by God to serve and not just to see them as ordinary people because even sometimes you may find that you may go somewhere and then a man comes to me straight and ask, Sister, can I marry you, and you wonder why, and you are having your habit. Somebody asks you, can I marry you, you can be a good wife. They really don't understand religious life.

## Theme 2: Life Wasted

Several interviewees mentioned that the ordinary people view religious life as a life wasted. Mostly the non-Catholics do not understand and they think it is a waste of time and waste of one's life. As Sr. Jean put it: [...] they see as if I am wasting my life and that I should be somewhere else doing something better than what I am doing. Likewise, Sr. Rose John added:

Some look at me as a potential wife. Yes, some don't understand what religious life is, like my friend in Maasai community told me that most of them don't have that idea of what is there in religious life. They were asking me when I finish and then get married, because for them, it is like you are there for some time. They don't consider this life a way of life, throughout your life. They feel that you are there for some time and then you get married. And worse still in that community because I was doing vocation promotion, so we went to visit one of our candidates and we called by the parish we were going to spend in the candidate's home, but the priest told us that in the Maasailand you don't spend time in their home, they are going to have a sword *mukuki* and then alert people that there are women waiting for them.<sup>4</sup> They have that culture that a woman cannot live alone. We did not even get the girl for she finished school and got a C minus and we take C plus.

## Theme 3: Procreation

Several participants mentioned that some ordinary people look at them as people who fear getting married while others look at them as potential wives. As Sr. Jean put it, "Some will approach you to marry you, those who do not understand are not encouraging."

Likewise, Sr. Rose John insisted, "Some say we are not honest because they believe that

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<sup>4</sup>Julius Sigei, 2011. "Myth verse reality in Maasai life." *Daily Nation* (Nairobi), March 16. Accessed November 9, 2015

<http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/Myth-versus-reality-in-Maasai-life-/-/1107872/1126024/-/klvhcaz/-/index.html>

"This comes from the myth associated with the Maasai culture that if a Maasai man plants his spear outside the house of his age mate, then he can proceed and have a private relationship with his friend's wife. According to Gideon Ole Pesi, a Maasai cultural expert, interviewed by Julius Sigei, this myth is not true. Ole Pesi further explains that "The planting of the spear was meant to show that one meant no harm and if anybody doubted him, then they could even spear him, as he had surrendered his weapon. It did not mean that one was free to have sex."

somebody cannot stay without a man the whole of her life. They look at as persons who fear getting married.” Similarly, Sr. Immaculate had this to say:

The concept of chastity they cannot understand how a normal human being would stay without a husband and their children. However, there are those who understand that this is a call from God and that, the moment God gives you that call he also gives you the grace to live it. However, for the lay people, it is very hard for them to understand what it really is. Consecrated life is a mystery and it is very hard for the lay people to understand especially when we talk of the three vows chastity, poverty, and obedience, as well, there are people who cannot understand the vow of poverty. They don’t understand why we work and give our salary to the congregation and then in return go back and ask for just a few coins to buy oil and soap—they cannot understand.

#### Theme 4: Religious Habit

Sr. Risper spoke about the habit [religious dress] and noted that ordinary people understand one as a religious only when she is wearing the habit. She said:

My experience with ordinary people is that they respect me as a religious woman. However, they only think of me a religious when I am in habit. It is difficult for them to understand the women religious who are in ordinary clothes, I think it will take some time for them to understand.

#### Theme 5: Respect and Support

Several participants spoke of their experiences with ordinary people as one of respect and support. As Sr. Jane Rose put it, “Some regard [us] as very high people from what I have got from them and they cannot even comprehend, they think you are beyond everything.” Likewise, Sr. Ann Kevin observed that those who understand religious life were empowering and supportive while those for whom the Gospel has not worked well in their lives brought many challenges. Other participants expressed their experiences in various ways. Sr. Jean had this to say:

When travelling in the public transport, some will talk to you to hear your views, others are just saying anything to provoke you kind of but naturally many have respect. Even a drunkard man will meet you on the way and start asking you to pray for him.

Sr. Miriam added:

They like the life we have chosen and are happy with our work. In fact after the church you find that they would like to talk with the sister, that means they appreciate us very much and they wish their own children, those who do not have religious persons within the setup they pray and wish my child can be a sister. They admire our life and our work and I think our life it gives them hope.



## Theme 6: Expectations

Many participants indicated that ordinary people expected much from them. For instance, they expect them to be witnesses, to be role models of the society and to be people who offer constant prayers for them. Three participants expressed the thoughts shared by others in the study. Sr. Violet said:

[The] majority with regard to religious life, my experience with them is that of a holy people and they hold that the sisters with a lot of respect and even a gap in between them and expect a lot from me. As the time goes on and with familiarity, this changes. With familiarity, when the society realises that we are one with them, they become very close like they are able to relate with me and I am an elder to them. One who can give an advice, a source of information and actually as somebody with all the answers they expect. Such that for example when I am a sister, whether I am a nurse or not, somebody will ask me, if she has a condition like heartburn, will ask me what I think is wrong or something that requires a doctor she expects me to have an answer. Something that requires counselling although I am not a counsellor. So a sister is seen as one who has all the answers in life.

Similarly, Sr. Lisa said:

They expect us to be persons who are supporting them in prayer and people who do not to make mistakes and you know that we are human. They don't really understand. They forget that despite that we are religious men and women we are human beings, so we have our weaknesses. That is what they forget that, and they have these expectations from us, when you come to intermingle with us, you hear a person asking, you mean even religious people can do this?

Sr. Jane Rose had this to say:

Ordinary people see in me a religious person who should not sin. I should be holy. Some who see me like that give a lot of respect especially the Christians who I encounter in apostolate and they have hope. They have that trust that they have somebody praying for them—I am close to God and they will say go and pray for us, go and pray for me.

The above discussion of the experiences of the participants clearly indicates that the ordinary people in Kenya have not much understanding of religious life. In particular, they do not understand the concept of celibacy or chastity undertaken by the religious women. The cultural worldview which places high value on fertility is a major contribution to this misunderstanding. By becoming religious, the sisters go against the social values that are considered fundamental in their communities. The renunciation of physical motherhood in this case becomes meaningless.

#### 5.4 Status Accorded to Religious Women by Ordinary People

The following section seeks to establish the status accorded to religious women by the ordinary people. To the question, “What status do the ordinary people accord to you as a religious woman? Do they see you as a married woman or as unmarried?”, interviewees often pointed out that ordinary people do not see them as married women and sometimes see them as barren women who cannot and do not want to give birth. Often asking them questions such as: “Why did you choose that religious life? Why did you not choose to be married? How do you manage?” As Sr. Ruth put it:

Some see us as unmarried. They also think we are barren and that is why we joined religious life and we are unmarried. The terminology that they are using this day—you know we have Sister Irene Stephanie Nyaatha a Consolata sister who was beatified, so the moment they see you they say, how are you Nyaatha? (Nyaatha means mother of mercy and love). They have taken the name Nyaatha. They also request, Sister pray for us. Others will call you a holy woman of God. They have different ways of addressing us, sister, remember you are supposed to bear witness in the way you live.

Likewise, Sr. Jane Rose stated:

Others will see you as unmarried and disturb you. They think that you are not married and they keep on telling you, no it cannot be. Some will even ask you, you mean you will never get a child and they know that you gave your life to Christ. They still carry that, like in the African tradition setup where everybody was expected to marry and beget children. They still carry that and they think you should build in your home, you should be rich and that way they can never be convinced. Even some of the family will ask you, you mean you don’t have? They cannot understand. They see you as having money. Some even hope that you will be there at one time but when they hear or see that you have cut the *kiande*, they look at you as if they are stranded.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Sr. Risper had this to say:

Some see us as married to Christ and others see us as unmarried. However, there are those who are not disturbed by what we are provided we are happy to be religious. Today there are many people not married in Kenya so our statutes do not bother them. The old men would rather have their daughters as nuns than have them in the streets or be divorcees or single parents.

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<sup>5</sup>They are puzzled because once a sister has cut the *kīande*, she becomes permanently committed to her spouse. Thus any person who viewed her as potential wife and who thought that she will be there for a period of time becomes stranded. Cutting *kīande* means that the sister is now permanently incorporated into the congregation.

Sr. Violet shared:

Some will see me as unmarried for those who don't understand what it is to be a religious. [...] While, on the other hand, for someone who has gone through catechism and this knowledge is instilled in them, they will be able to say, yes this is a married person and this [religious profession ceremony] gives not just the status but it goes along with how one presents herself. If I present myself the way a married woman is presenting herself in the sense of responsibility, not just the ring, they will say this is a married woman and the way she keeps herself, she is really a married woman. So more [than] with the physical marriage, it goes more with the service.

Sr. Naomi said:

They see you as unmarried. The only people who are able to understand being married to Christ are those who have deep faith. It is very hard for the ordinary persons to understand you as married to Christ. It also depends on how you live with people. When you live a life like you are saying you are a religious, but they cannot see what you are doing as a religious, I think how they are perceiving is what they are seeing from you.

Several informants reported that some ordinary people seemed to understand the significance of the bridal metaphor, whereas others focused on the fact that the sisters were not literally married. As Sr. Annette put it:

[The] majority see me as married to Christ and if I do something contrary to my religious life, some will challenge me, like they will remind me of the life I am expected to live. Others think that I can change my mind and marry them and they will come proposing for marriage. Like I am just waiting here to change my mind. I have met men proposing for that or they start calling me, Sister I will give you a baby—such things. Some may see me as married to the priest, they think that I am the wife of the priest. Especially the *matatu* drivers and *matatu* touts—that is what they comment. In the *matatu* they will call you madam.<sup>6</sup> Madam is the common name they address. You find people who are drunk with a lot of respect, the moment they see a sister, they ask, sister pray for me.

Sr. Rose John said:

Some see us as married to Christ—those who understand religious life. They see you as married to Christ. They see you as sacred, belonging to the church—offered to God. However, some do not have that idea. Some see you as someone who is in religious life for some time and you will get out when that time is over. It is like they are waiting when that time will be over.

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<sup>6</sup>The term madam is a polite way used to address any woman either married or unmarried.

Sr. Jean shared her experience:

There are some who will see us as married to Christ, and for the fact that we have the title of sister,<sup>7</sup> they believe that we are married to Christ. They have that concept. Most of them call me sister.

Sr. Naomi said:

They consider me as someone who is married to Christ and others see me as just a woman who is not married. The Protestants do not understand but for Catholics mostly admire and even some say that if they must become girls,<sup>8</sup> they would become religious.

Sr. Faith said:

Most of the ordinary people highly respect me believing that I have given my whole self to God. In a normal and human circumstances, it is impossible to understand how a human being could marry Christ, who is God, but as Christ said, it is possible to God but not to men.

Other interviewees shared out how they are addressed by the ordinary people: Sr. Lisa said that in her community sisters are called virgins. For Sr. Jean, they see her as married to Christ and they call her sister only when they see a veil. Sr. Joan said:

They call us *Wamwarĩ*. *Wamwarĩ* is someone who is not married by somebody. They also call us *Thingĩ* (virgins), that is, somebody who is not married by an earthly man. *Nyakĩnyua* is a woman who is married. We can be called *Nyakĩnyua*, but the things that the *Nyakĩnyua* do, we cannot do them. Even if she cuts the shoulder, she does it alone. There is no one she is doing it with for Christ cannot be seen. So when we do these rituals, we are only representing, it is not real.

Sr. Jane Rose shared experience:

They still call *Wamwarĩ* and some call us sisters. *Wamwarĩ* is simply dying. There is a lot of respect from the ordinary people even if they ask you, you mean you will never have a child still you hear them saying or referring you as a holy person. There is still that value of people of God even if some do not understand, but still you remind them [of] something. Now that there was even that beatification of Sister Irene Nyaatha, it has even brought a lot of respect to

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<sup>7</sup>Calling a woman a “sister” does not mean that the ordinary people understand the bridal metaphor, they are simply using a conventional title that they don’t connect with marriage to Christ.

<sup>8</sup>This means that if they become young again where they will be in a position to discern their vocation, they would chose to become religious persons. According to the constitution of the Assumption sisters of Nairobi, the minimum age to join the congregation is eighteen years and from the age thirty candidates are considered as late vocation and they are admitted on their own merit. Most of the candidates join at the age of eighteen.

sisters because everybody now knows us. Now whenever we go to the *Matatu* (public transport vehicles), everybody is calling you sister and even some call you Irene Nyaatha. Since the beatification was in the media, everybody was curious to know who sisters are. Some people even the Protestants are eager to know what we do and it has brought us awareness for sisters and like, people didn't know sisters but all of a sudden, it has awakened people. So everybody wants to know who sisters are, what they do, there is a lot of respect. Beatification of Sister Irene Nyaatha has brought us a lot of respect, especially in Kenya, and now that we are around the diocese of Nyeri, people know us, everybody knows you. I get shocked because people didn't know sisters but all of a sudden everybody has opened their eyes and there is a lot of respect even in the *Matatu* (vehicles)—even people you don't know. It has brought us a lot of respect.

The enhanced respect for the sisters is not due to the fame of Sr. Irene Stephane Nyaatha, but rather the beatification has given her an enhanced spiritual status. By not having children, a sister is being denied ancestor status; by being beatified, Sr. Irene has achieved something analogous to ancestral status. In relation to ATR, Sr. Irene Nyaatha has become an ancestor; a link between the visible and invisible worlds. Since the principal role of the ancestors in the Bantu culture is to guard, protect and promote life, Sr. Irene having played this special and distinctive role in giving life to the community ultimately becomes an ancestor.

The discussion in the above section has clearly indicated how religious women in Kenya are trying to inculturate religious life. The section has further shown that religious women identify with the marriage metaphor and they understand religious life as a form of marriage. The section has shown a kind of disconnect between the portrayal of religious profession as marriage and how ordinary people view religious women as unmarried. Despite the elaborate wedding ceremony, the sisters are still considered unmarried by external observers. As the participants noted, the ordinary people do not recognize this as a marriage. The names that they give such as *wamwarĩ*, indicate that they don't consider the profession ceremony as a real marriage. They even approach the sisters and propose to marry them.

## 5.5 Non-marital Aspects of Inculturation

This section explores the non-marital aspects of inculturation in the religious life in Kenya. These are aspects that religious do generally, but that are interpreted in African cultural terms or that are expressed more intensely by Africans than by Westerners. The following topics were examined: the meaning of inculturation, the significance of inculturation to religious life, whether the local congregations reflect an African identity in

the way they live their religious lives, and how they are practising African traditional values in their communities.

#### 5.5.1 Meaning of Inculturation

Questions in this section were asked to explore the extent to which inculturation of religious life is being practiced in Kenya. To the question, “what do you understand by the term inculturation?”, without exception, all the participants understood inculturation as the integration of faith and culture. The following comment express the thoughts shared by others in the study. Sr. Violet explained:

It is taking the good values that are accepted in the society in the cultural background and practicing them in the spiritual life. For example, think of marriage and think of religious life. When we talk of inculturation, whatever is valued in the Kikuyus that can still be applicable to the religious life, church life, spiritual life and that is compatible.

Sr. Miriam understood inculturation as a way of integration of traditions (African cultures) and Christianity and again to the religious life. Many participants understood inculturation as the integration of African cultures and values with the Christian culture. It is also significant to note that the participants spoke of integrating the good African cultural values with Christianity and avoiding the harmful practices.

#### 5.5.2 Significance of inculturation to religious life:

To the question, “what is the significance of inculturation to religious life?” participants emphasized three areas: better understanding of religious life, cultural context and unity. The most prevalent theme was understanding of religious life. For Sr. Evelyne, inculturation helps her to understand religious life more, so that it is not foreign. Likewise, Sr. Faith felt that inculturation gives meaning and understanding to religious life. Similarly, Sr. Jane Rose felt that inculturation helps in deepening the meaning [of religious life] to the people and makes traditional values be more understood. Most of the participants had similar understanding: Sr. Jean had this to say:

It will make our people those we are serving to understand and accept easily the message we are delivering to them. It also makes our work of evangelization easier when we don't bring to them new things because in inculturation we have touched the life that they know. So when they hear things that are familiar to them they are able to understand the message I am delivering to them more than when I am just taking things which are new to them and may be they are from foreigners. In that situation, our people like hearing new things, but not imposing on them, but when you blend with something which is not new,

something they are familiar with doing, you find that they are able to understand more and take it and own it.

Cultural context was another core theme raised by the participants. Comments from three participants illustrate this point. Sr. Annette shared:

It is very important because it will help religious people to be true to themselves, other than living what is imposed on them by the whites. They are helped by that African cultures being practised in the religious life for the sake of the gospel. In the word and in the liturgy, as an African I offer myself as I am. I am not somebody different. I am encountering God as an African and I want to celebrate him as an African.

Sr. Risper added:

Inculturation is very significant to religious life, not only in Africa, but in any given culture. Inculturation then will mean that the community takes in what fits in their culture and dress it in the gospel values. The gospel and also the religious life can only be lived in the cultural setting. Just like we say Christianity builds on nature, so religious life, it cannot be lived in the air it has to be in the context of a culture. Unfortunately those who brought in religious life did not explain the difference between the religious life itself and the culture that brought it in or that it was dressed rather.

Sr. Deborah, who was from an international community, brought up the theme of unity:

It brings unity in religious life and also they say diversity is strength. Diversity is when I can be able to learn and accept the other person into my own life. When we can live together in harmony without being able to differentiate. I can appreciate your culture. How can I bring out the positive aspects of your culture into mine and how can you accept mine. So inculturation is where we let go so many things so that we may be able to live as a family, as a community.

Overall, the participants seemed to understand the inculturation of religious life as enabling them live it more like Africans rather than imitating the western model of religious.

### 5.5.3 Reflection of African Identity among Religious Women

On the question, “Would you say that the local congregations in Kenya reflect an African identity in the way they live? In the community, observance of vows and in their ministries?”, 11 participants responded in the affirmative that local congregations reflect an African identity, seven respondents said to some extent they do reflect, while three respondents said no.

The participants who responded in the affirmative that local congregations do reflect an African identity in living their religious life raised the following themes: community living; welcoming; respect; evangelical counsels; rooted in African culture; mission or apostolate; reconciliation and visiting of parents and relatives. On the other hand,

individualism was pointed out as hindering local congregations from reflecting an African identity in their lives.

### Theme 1: Community Living

In this theme, respondents spoke about sharing and community living<sup>9</sup> as the ways in which the local congregations reflect an African identity. Community living was a strong value in ATR. Sisters live this value by living together; sharing things in common; living like a family by loving each other and working together; praying in common which is a must for all members; communal celebrations for instance, celebrating the life of each, i.e., birthdays, feast days, and other joyful occasions; communal sharing like attending weddings and

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<sup>9</sup>Community life refers to members of a religious institute living together and sharing a common mission of prayer and work. The Second Vatican Council's call for the religious congregations to renew themselves according to the Gospels, the spirit of the founder, the signs of the time and the call to go out into the world to serve the people created a phenomenon which saw the elimination of cloistral regulations and the exodus of many women from religious congregations. According to Mary Ann Wichroski, "Final Vows: Organisational Dilemmas and Emergent Status-reconstruction of the Contemporary American Nun" (PhD diss., University of New Hampshire, 1994), accessed November 27, 2015. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, the outcome of this exodus was that many communities became smaller and resulted in many nuns living alone in apartments and rented houses rather than convents. Wichroski notes that many sisters see the loss of community as of great concern because of loss of friendship and closeness and because of the concerns about retirements since there are young fewer nuns to support the elderly. She continues that despite the lack of community structures, many sisters report to having deeper spirituality and more responsibility in their spiritual life. In addition, in the wake of Vatican II, most religious congregations in the Europe and North America placed a great emphasis on mission because it was the defining characteristic of their form of religious life. They understood mission to be a form of service in response to the needs of the world. Common life was therefore not appropriate for apostolic religious and was thus dropped together with other monastic structures. The issue of community living is a subject of debate among many scholars. For instance. Kerr Fergus, "Priorities in Religious Life," *New Blackfriars* 54 (1973): 436, accessed on November 19, 2015 <http://www.jstor/stable/43246023>, urges that the primary service that religious render to the church and to the world is the witness of their life together as a community. He urges that job oriented approach distorts religious life and leads to the disintegration of religious orders and communities. He further posits that what is distinctive about religious life is that religious consent to live according to the evangelical counsels, but in community.

For the African congregations, community living is one of the most important elements of religious life. The communitarian element of religious life is easily understood and assimilated because of its communitarian cultural tradition. Community living is often stressed above individualism in Africa. Further, because of the value attached to sharing in the African families, right from childhood an individual is taught to share what he or she has with the members of the family. For the religious this aspect of sharing is a requirement for the vow of poverty. It is in the community that individual religious practice this value.



funerals for relatives and friends; living their communion in dialogue and sharing meals, prayers etc. No one can claim anything as her own. As Sr. Immaculate put it:

In my congregation we emphasize the aspect of communion and that is the aspect that was really emphasized in the olden times. Communion is very African and you know people used to stay in the villages and they used to share their food together and nobody was going hungry because they believed in the spirit of sharing and that is how we emphasize in our vow of poverty. Like we have a common pool and there is nobody who can say I own this in the community or I own that. We share what is in the pool and we put all our resources and then we share equally. As the spirit of generosity and hospitality and that is what characterizes the African culture.

Sr. Hilda said:

Our community life and communion is the mark of our congregation and we strive so much to live in communion despite the fact that people are busy they ensure that we live together so that aspect of community is really found in our congregation.

Sr. Miriam added:

To me I feel we have lived or we live our life as a family. As we are living together as brothers and sisters at home, in our communities we don't live one we live more than two and we listen to one another. We also respect one another and when we have needs like for example if one sister is having a sick relative, the community feels that that is our home and we should go to see the sick. And when we have funerals, we also go for we belong to one family. This is how we were brought up and we have adapted that as our culture from home and to the congregation.

Sr. Jean also observed that community life is practiced more in the local congregations than it is in the international congregations. For instance, in the local congregations one cannot be sent alone while in the international congregations they can. Sr. Naomi too said she found a lot of African identity when members shared the little they had and when the superior acted like a mother. However, Sr. Risper felt that community living as lived by the religious people is artificial and forced whereas in the African context it was spontaneous.

## Theme 2: Welcoming

In this theme, several respondents mentioned welcoming, generosity, and respect of elders and ancestors as way in which local congregations are reflecting their African identity. They also observed that welcoming is less practised in the international congregations than it is in the local Kenyan congregations. Participants explained that hospitality is manifested

through creating time for people as enshrined in the African saying, “a visitor we say is like a river, he or she comes and goes”; being received well in the local communities; not putting people off, rather welcoming them and sharing what they have and receiving visitors, even those who have not reported that they are coming, and feeding them. As Sr. Faith put it:

The sense of welcoming and generosity is also an identity and as sisters serving in Kenya, we still have it in our customs to welcome everybody and especially those who were needy, because in the tradition nobody was turned away and anything you had belonged to the community. Generosity and welcoming are the values that are really observed and also respect to the old and young in our apostolate.

Likewise, Sr. Jean insisted:

We are very hospitable as Africans because as I said we share things in common. If it is a visitor he or she is always welcome even in our setup as consecrated life, because if we do not have that value of welcoming people, you find that we will even be dull and people will wonder whether we were chased away. So we are really very welcoming. I entered in an international community and you find that even in their dining, there is not that socializing when they are eating even though we have to have the table etiquette. But you find in our African religious almost everywhere we are the same because you will find people sharing at the table, people laughing so there is not that limitation. But in that particular one I visited you could see the coldness of the members. So later I asked and I was told they are not supposed to talk much when they are eating.

Sr. Risper said:

In my congregation we are all Africans and I guess this makes it easy to integrate ATR into the consecrated life. For instance, the issue of hospitality is integrated, when a visitor comes in he or she joins the community for a meal if it was meal time. It does not matter whether they had reported they will come or not.

### Theme 3: Respect

Participants mentioned: respect of the people and also the congregation; respect for one another; respect for the authorities and respect for the ancestors, which makes it easy to venerate and pray through the saints. Sr. Debora, from an international congregation, said:

In the African culture, we respect everybody and also they don't discriminate and especially we respect the elderly. That is why for me it is different from the Western side because here you will find an old sister, she wants to work and the young Kenyan sisters want to help because in the African values, they value that the old should rest and then the young should do the work. But we value respect, obedience and also we value the community.

Sr. Rose John said:

Respect was a value in ATR and the young were expected to respect the old. We have it in the religious life where the young sisters have to respect the old sisters as much as we could be better than them, maybe in education or any other quality, but that aspect of respect for the elderly is there.

Sr. Risper said:

In my congregation we are all Africans and I guess this makes it easy to integrate ATR into the consecrated life. [...] respect for the ancestors makes it easy to venerate and pray through the saints.

#### Theme 4: Evangelical Counsels

The sub-categories under this theme included obedience, chastity and poverty. Obedience was a value in ATR, hence participants spoke of listening to their leaders and showing respect for each other as ways in which they practice the vow as Africans. For instance, the practice of the vow of obedience was compared with the way a married woman would obey her own husband. As Sr. Jean put it:

We have the vow of obedience, which is very vital in the religious life, and we practise it such a way that we have to listen to our leaders, and the same case when I was back at home, I could not go against what my mum and dad would tell me. I had to be very keen on their advice and the same case now in religious life, now I have to be attentive to the word of God and to my superiors.

Sr. Immaculate added:

I vow obedience to my superior and obedience to God. The African woman was also submissive to her husband and in the same way I am submissive to Christ who I got married to and I obey Christ by being obedient to my superior. The vow of chastity was another sub-category under the evangelical vows.

Participants spoke of giving life in a spiritual manner, love and service to the community as ways in which they practice the vow of chastity in an African way. Sr. Jean had this to say:

Then the vow of celibacy, you find that we have given our life, our love so that we are able to share that love with others and that is why we forego marriage for the sake of the kingdom. Then in our traditions you find that it goes against the current because the African traditions don't believe in single life or religious life, but they believe in giving birth and continuing with life, which now in our consecrated life we give life in a spiritual manner, but we who are living the life, there is that connection of giving life in the tradition and as spiritual mother, I continue the creation by sharing my life and that of continuity of spiritual life.

Sr. Naomi said

[...] the African woman through her chastity was able to love everybody else, just as we are called to love everyone. By the fact that we do service to people to the whole community, I feel that it is an extension of the ATR. They give service to the whole community not just your own. Just like a woman would give her service not only to her husband but to the whole village.

Sr. Rose Jane stated:

[...] virginity was highly valued in the traditional African society. Faithfulness in marriage was highly regarded in ATR. That is also applied to religious life, that is, if we are not faithful to our bridegroom who is Christ then we dread punishment or excommunication.

On the sub-category of poverty, participants pointed out the aspect of sharing as the way they practise the vow of poverty in an African way: sharing what each person has for the good of the community. A few comments reflect the thoughts of others in the study. Sr. Jean said:

When it come to the vow of poverty, there is that sharing in religious life, that self-giving, which even in our own traditions at home you could not eat alone, we shared things in common. I even remember in my own family, you could not cook something and eat there alone, we are nine of us. And then you find even in the villages there is that notion that a child is not of your own alone, the mother can be told that, that when there is a new-born somewhere, you find women coming with water, firewood, gifts, food, so that they share.

Sr. Immaculate shared her thoughts:

The vow of poverty, you are called to take care of the property which you found with your husband and even the one you get after you are married. That is how I see it being integrated in the living of the vows.

#### Theme 5: Rooted in African Culture

Being rooted in African culture was another theme raised by two participants as the reason that enabled the local congregations to reflect African identity in their living in community and in the practice of the evangelical counsels. For instance, they are able to integrate aspects of ATR, such as rituals, symbols and African art into religious life. Sr. Annette observed:

Local congregations are more rooted in the African culture, and religious life does not leave them foreign to their own culture, so in the community observance of the vows and in their ministries we can say local congregations

have integrated quite a lot, for we find the use of symbols, rituals, and African art.

Sr. Faith said:

Local congregations in Kenya reflect an African identity in their lives by being aware of their culture and tradition and integrating only those values which are according to the Christian teaching.

#### Theme 6: Mission or Apostolate

On the theme of mission, participants pointed out the aspects of commitment and dedication to whatever one does in religious life; hard work; division of labour; giving life and lack of dependence on donors as ways through which they reflect their African identity in their mission. Sr. Jean felt that it is in the apostolate where they actually live their consecration by giving life to the people they serve. Sr. Annette had this to say:

They [local congregations] depend on their work, they have to work hard. They don't depend on help or donations from the outside but they have to get their daily bread, the way Africans used to work very hard, so they practice farming, they do a lot of things to sustain themselves.

Sr. Dorothy stated:

[...]in the African traditional society, they believed so much in the division of work because they knew when work is divided, it is done easily and quickly and there is efficiency. Now when we come to our apostolate, we do but we do different works, everybody is allocated an apostolate—the division of labour and together we make work easier for the church.

Sr. Jane Rose shared her thoughts:

The value of hard work has been inculturated because hard work was valued in the traditional setting, so that you pay back, for instance, when one was leaving home for marriage to some home, you were to show that you are hardworking so that we value your hard work for the dowry [*sic*] that is paid. Responsibility again I think that is also in the religious life, whereby if you are not hardworking then you were not given responsibilities because they see you will fail the congregation in certain apostolates. For example, if we are to be given an apostolate in Kisii diocese, we usually get people who are hardworking so that we uphold the values of hard work. Now when we talk of Franciscan Sisters of St. Anna [an international order], which we are under St. Anne, she was very hard working, taking care of her daughter who became the mother of Christ.

#### Theme 7: Reconciliation

Participants pointed out that, they have moments of reconciliation in their congregations, just as it was in the traditional African society. For example, when two parties

are not at peace with each other, they don't just look at it to pass, they share and encourage one another to talk to the other one, so that they can resolve the issue. Sr. Immaculate described how they carry out the rite of reconciliation in their congregation:

In African culture there are strong aspects of forgiveness and reconciliation and they had rituals that help them to forgive and reconcile. We do that in the congregation like occasionally when we are together like in a recollection, we like to invite Father to facilitate that session of forgiveness and reconciliation and we feel forgiven. And because we are a young congregation and we are not many, at least like in December, we have to get together and perform the ritual. What we do, we invite a priest, the priest will prepare a scriptural reading that is now based on the forgiveness and reconciliation, after that we will be issued with papers and we write what we feel heavy in our hearts and that we would want to forgive and there is a pot on the fire and then we put all those papers there and we burn them.

#### Theme 8: Visiting of Parents and Relatives

Visiting of parents and relatives was another theme raised by the participants. They spoke about: visiting each other's families; collaborating with families; visiting their parents and relatives as indicated in their rule of life which is distinctive to many African congregations; visiting friends' sick people's homes (not empty handed) but with an African basket (carrying something in a basket for them); collaborating with parents, relatives and friends at the time of joys and sorrows whenever possible. Participants said that these aspects are integrated in their congregation and they make each individual feel that she belongs to that family. Before the profession or taking the vows, they visit the families where the sisters come from and they explain and they help in the preparation of the ceremony. Sr. Jean said:

Touch of family, we still have that touch, we have not disconnected with our families. So we are still strong including them in spite of being in religious life. I still have ties with them because I have to go home to my holidays when my time comes. So we still have those values of our people. If they have celebrations we join them, if any celebration or anything happening at home I am aware.

Other aspects of ATR mentioned included: integration of African cultures in the initial formation, where they teach African cultures; use of holy sites and charity and care of the less fortunate in the society. As Sr. Risper put it: "Awe for holy sites and unusual phenomena like mountains. In ATR Mount Kenya, which is the biggest mountain in my country, was revered and seen as sacred and so it is even today. At its foot we have a retreat house in a town called Nanyuki and many religious go to make their retreats there, thus applying ATR in religious life." Likewise, Sr. Jane Rose observed:

In ATR taking care of the less fortunate was emphasized, today we have a compulsory home visit, we visit those who are less fortunate on Sundays and we go out for an extra apostolate apart from the one that we are assigned to. If you get home and we find there are challenges and we feel we can come in and help, so we really want everybody included in the society we are trying to bridge the gap of the poor and the rich.

A few participants such as Sr. Risper, felt that that would depend on the individual congregations. Congregations that are well established do identify with African cultures depending with how mature the members are. Sr. Doris a Mũgĩkũyũ from a local congregation also felt that this would depend with the individuals for there are some sisters who are very serious about life and live a very good life, mothers, hospitable, just like African women. Sr. Deborah from an international congregation said: “Not all. Some congregations, because for example you find that in our congregation, it is not very much noted. You know us, we were founded in Spain. So it is hard for them to catch up with our tradition. But then you find that it is very hard.” Sr. Lisa, also from an international congregation said: “Not so much. Our Africanism is so little.”

One participant felt that to some extent local congregations do reflect an African identity, but they are somewhat influenced by the Western cultures. Sr. Deborah, from an international congregation, reported that they too are trying to live in an African way:

We are trying to see how we can understand the vows in an African or in a Kenyan way, which is different from the Western side, but the problem is that the vows came from the Western side, most of them. Like the constitution was not written in Kenya, it was written in France, so we are trying to put it in the Kenyan way. This is also a challenge, but I am sure many congregations, they are really trying to work on the African identity in the way they live in the community and in the vows.

Three participants from local congregations felt that the local congregations do not reflect an African identity in their lives. The participants mentioned influence by society, secularism, individualism, disintegration of common life as lived by Africans, and unhealthy relationships as the hindrances to living religious life in an Africa way. As Sr. Ruth put it: “People are living individualistic lives. We are all moving in an American way. Like the way some sisters stay in their rooms and do their work without asking anybody.” Similarly, Sr. Violet said:

No. The influence by the society and secularism has influenced the religious. The common life shared by the Africans is getting eroded at time the sisters are brought together by common meals which may not be common. The issue of sharing that was highly valued by Africans is almost gone. The gap between the haves and the have nots is very distinct. In keeping the vows, this is left to the

individual's relationship with her God as her observance of vows is concerned. The vow of chastity is threatened by unhealthy relationships, unlike in the African setup, where infidelity and unfaithfulness were highly punished.

The above discussion has indicated how religious women in the local congregations in Kenya are identifying as Africans by the integration of various aspects of ATR in their religious lives. However, not all sisters agree that this is the case, especially those in the international orders.

In response to the question of the possibility of fully inculturating religious life and hence making it completely African, thirteen participants answered in the affirmative, four participants said no, two felt that they are still far from inculturating religious life in Africa, while two did not respond. The participants who answered in the affirmative said they have a lot of hope and because they like coming to Christ as African women, they believe they will be able to inculturate religious life fully. It is also a fact that the missionaries are going back to Europe and to America and they are getting old, so the African sisters see a time when they will bring their African cultures into religious life, inculturate the vows and their way of life and make it fully African. As Sr. Jean put it, "I feel very strongly yes because as time goes on we have many pure African congregations coming up who have no influence or any formation by the whites and so their way of life reflects that of an African religious woman. So with the coming up of many African congregations, you find that the religious life will be seen clearly and will be real." Likewise, Sr. Risper insisted:

Like I mentioned earlier, there is no religious life outside culture. This life can only be realized with a certain culture. There will be a time, yes, when African religious will feel at home in their culture but that does not mean it will be African religious life. This life can only be lived in the context of a culture. Just like we have no American religious life or Canadian religious life or Italian religious life, we will not have African religious life. We will always have religious life in African but owned and lived by African women who have an African identity.

Sr. Rose John said:

Of course it is already coming. When we have this inculturation, we are no longer talking of religious life in Africa, we are talking of African religious life. We are already there especially for those congregations that are purely African. Through all the African inculturation of what is there, we are also not talking of religious life in Africa, that is, the religious life that was introduced to us by the missionaries which we are moving away from in most of our African local congregations. We are already talking about it without knowing.



Sr. Annette said:

There is a possibility of reaching that time of appreciating ourselves as Africans if we can learn to sustain ourselves, not to depend so much on what the whites are bringing or they are controlling us and we can do this by embracing our values and going back to the roots. I believe it will enable us to find ground. We are all growing and we can find grounds to define religious life to us as Africans. Well, we borrowed from the white people but we can still define it as African, by celebrating it as African and appreciate one another despite the differences. I hope that one day we will reach there.

Several participants, however, felt that religious life cannot be fully inculturated. They felt that as they seek to inculturate religious life, they still need to borrow a few things from the other side [Europe and North America]. Also the fact that Africans tend to embrace everything foreign and discarding anything African as outdated makes it difficult to fully inculturate religious life. As Sr. Ruth put it:

No, because we are all in the Western culture. There is a lot of Western influence in religious formation stages whereby there is observing of the church law; there is a bit of restriction in religious life. It is a bit difficult and personally I don't think that there will be such a time.

Similarly, Sr. Mary Agnes had this to add:

There will be no such a time because we were started by the missionaries and most of the things we get from Rome and it is a must that we accomplish them. So there will not be a time we will reach at that. We can change dressing but there are some of the things that we cannot be able to change. There are some things that are beyond Africa.

## 5.6 Challenges Facing Religious Women in Kenya

The question, "What are the challenges of being a consecrated woman in Kenya?" was asked in order to enumerate the various challenges facing religious women in Kenya. This awareness would help religious women seek effective ways of addressing them for effective evangelization. Participants mentioned the following challenges: secularization, technology and modernization; lack of understanding of what religious life entails among the ordinary people; lack of witness among some religious women; economic and financial difficulties and other challenges.

### Theme 1: Technology/Modernization/Secularization

More than half of the respondents spoke about secularization, technology and modernization as the major challenges facing consecrated women in Kenya. Participants reported how these have affected community life, prayer life and the vowed life: they have led to individualism, which has affected community life, reduced socialization, fostered and

attachment to programmes, thus leading to sisters forgetting their mission and to distortion of the mind. Several participants mentioned that technology has made most of [the] consecrated diverted from their simplicity of life for they are spending a lot of their time thinking about worldly life hence forgetting religious life and its expectations. Sr. Ruth lamented:

Some of consecrated women tend to have a don't-care attitude and competing with the world for example in dressing, which is leading to lack of respect among our own Christians. It has affected the vow of obedience and poverty because we want to be in the comfort zone.

Several participants noted that lifestyle was catching up with the religious very much. An example is, a lot of love for materialism where the religious value how much they have, what they do, and how far they have studied. Respondents felt that religious women are becoming like the laity who value the riches and the wealth they have. Some reported that religious women were becoming unfaithful to their vowed life.

However, despite the above negative effects, participants felt that secularization, modernization and technology have made religious women become more in touch with what is happening in the world. Hence they are able to reach out to the needs of all.

## Theme 2. Lack of Understanding of Religious Life among the Ordinary People

The majority of the participants felt there was a lack of understanding among the laity. According to the participants, society, which is very much secularized and westernised cannot understand why a religious woman takes the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience and what she means by it. They also reported that ordinary people do not take them as people who are offered to God. Several reported that religious life as lived today has changed and is seen as a wrong choice to many and as a way of running away from marital responsibilities. For instance, the strong bond Africans have with their families and the view of Africans about the continuity of the family whereby being married keeps the clan going makes it look strange if women are not married. As Sr. Dorothy put it:

One of the challenges to religious women is that people do not really understand our life, even if we try to explain to them, they do not understand, they think we are abnormal. That [is] one of the major challenges. They don't understand how a normal woman can just stay in the church—they think we stay in the church.

Likewise, Sr. Jane Rose had this to say:

There is misunderstanding even in the family, because they expect help from us. When you go home, there are a lot of expectations which you cannot meet. You really contradict people, like when I go home, even the people of the local church are inviting me for a *harambee* (fundraising) and they know even I don't

have [money]. It is a great challenge in Kenya because [of] the needs of the people around you and also they don't see you as somebody who lacks, they think you have everything. Even the chairperson of the church invites people. I have undergone that and they expect you to appear anytime they have a function while it is not easy because you have your commitment, the law of obedience you are supposed to be somewhere but they think you can be free and they even ask if you have a vehicle. They look at you with another eye like someone who has the freedom.

### Theme 3: Lack of Witness

Several interviewees mentioned the lack of witness among some religious women. They said that the present day witness among the religious women is not as it was many years ago. They pointed out that their witness is questioned by their people. Some added that they have scandals which somehow silence their voice as consecrated persons and weakens their moral authority. Others pointed out that some religious women lack commitment to their vows. Sr. Deborah had this to say:

With the church having some issues like sisters leaving the community to get married or priests married or getting into relationships, nowadays people don't value the religious people, they take us just like the other women—you may meet with somebody asking you a question and so you wonder doesn't he know I am a religious or what? It is like that respect has faded away.

### Theme 4: Economic and Financial Difficulties

Economic and financial difficulties were another challenge. Participants reported that some of the services that they offer are not paid for and hence they are unable to support many needy cases and even their family members, due to lack of finances. The following comments further illustrate how religious women struggle financially as family and ordinary persons look to them for financial help. Sr. Annette said:

There are many challenges and especially in our country Kenya, being a Third World country, the poverty, which has also touched us, especially the local congregations, also touches each and every person in the congregation. This is because the processes we go through are like any other woman getting married. You have to look here and there to see where to get the daily bread and especially being in a Third World country it is not that easy.

Sr. Jean shared her thoughts:

The challenges I find being a consecrated woman are that our people do not really understand the life. Our families look at us to help them solve their problems and especially financial problems and then you find we are also religious we are termed as somebody who is lost because I will not bring dowry [sic] to my family and then I will not have the continuity of life, I don't have children who will name me and then continue with life. People do not really

understand the life and so you find also that the poverty in our country makes our people look at us as if we are going to solve their problems, and with our vows, we are not able to go to that far.

Sr. Naomi said:

To be a consecrated religious is still important, but it has so many challenges, especially whereby you see people before, they expected the sisters to be able to give them things free, medical attention and also given clothes and food. Today even the religious are being given by the Christians themselves.<sup>10</sup>

#### Theme 5. Other Challenges

Other challenges included: ethnic allegiance; corruption; decline in religious vocations; vocations that are not genuine—many choose the life as an escape from worldly difficulties; conflict in community living; poor formation processes, especially the lack of African cultural values; lack of good leadership—Superior Generals favouring members from their ethnic communities; political instability—violence in some parts of the country which makes it difficult to work there; religious women owning property like cars, etc.; a comfortable life where love of material things is carried into religious life; the breakdown of society's moral fibre, due to the effects of technology, a factor that has led the world to see no meaning in religious life and finally the Church leadership, which is still far from seeing religious women as co-workers. They see them as inferior to the priests. For instance, they would rather give a stipend to a lay catechist than give to a religious woman or brother. Some Kenyan bishops see religious women as source of cheap labour and are not concerned with their working conditions, living conditions or their health.

The preceding discussion indicates the magnitude of the challenges facing religious women in Kenya. Most of the ordinary people seem not to fully understand religious life. This is indicated by how they perceive religious life. Those who have entered religious life are seen as having made a wrong choice, and worse, as people who have run away from marital responsibilities. Further, they tend to look at religious women as people who are lost, first because they are not able to bring some bride price according to African customs. Second, entering religious life means that they will not beget children and become ancestors,

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<sup>10</sup>The local community frequently supports the religious and the priests with food items. Some Christians are committed to offering their first produce from their farms to religious men and women and to the priests. On another level, the local community feels that through the commitment of their daughter to the church, they too have become part of that relationship. So, just as they would take part of their harvest to their married daughters, they too give part of their harvest to the sisters and priests.

thus putting the continuity of life for the family and the clan in jeopardy. In the traditional Kenyan context, a person who had no descendants could not become an ancestor. He or she could not find happiness in the next world for he or she did not have children to honour him and so he was considered completely cut off from the community. Such a person, according to John Mbiti was considered forever dead since his line of physical continuation is blocked.<sup>11</sup> Further, the Agĩkũyũ naming system emphasizes that a married couple name their children after the four grandparents, for children are the bearers of lineage names. As Waweru has observed, the family identity of the Agĩkũyũ is carried on in each generation by naming children in the following manner: “the first boy is named after the father’s father, the second boy after the mother’s father. The first girl is named after the father’s mother and the second after the mother’s mother. The subsequent children are named after the brothers and sisters of the father and the mother; from the oldest to the youngest.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, ancestors were honoured in the naming system and people believed that the actual spirit of the grandparents and other ancestors comes into the new child named after them.<sup>13</sup> Based on this understanding, parents are therefore happy when their children marry for they view themselves as reincarnated in their grandchildren. This is perhaps why consecrated life is so difficult for parents to accept. For this reason, even with the elaborate marriage rituals religious women are not seen as married women. Such questions as, “You mean you will never get a child? Why did you not choose married life?” and many more posed to religious women shows the ordinary people have not fully understood religious life in Kenya and that is a big challenge for religious women.

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<sup>11</sup>Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 133. See also Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 115.

<sup>12</sup>Humphrey Waweru, *The Bible and African Culture: Mapping Transactional Inroads* (Eldoret, Kenya: Zapf Chancery Publishers Africa, 2011), 32.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

## Chapter Six

### Discussion

Within the context of the Kenyan population today, there is a misunderstanding of what religious life is all about. This was the researcher's initial hypothesis that has been borne out in various ways by the interviews. This study was conducted to come to a deeper understanding of how this misunderstanding is experienced from the viewpoints of the Kenyan religious women and the way they are inculturating religious life to make it more comprehensible to the ordinary people. This research was guided by three research questions and a hypotheses. These included: (i) To what extent are the consecrated women in Kenya integrating aspects of ATR in their religious profession? (ii) Do the Kenyan consecrated women find the marriage model or bride of Christ metaphor as being operative in their lives and ministries? (iii) How do the ordinary people perceive consecrated life in Kenya? The hypothesis of the study was that indigenous African women religious congregations in Kenya integrate various aspects of traditional matrimonial rituals into their religious profession ceremonies, in order to help the local people understand the concepts that define religious life that most Kenyans have little understanding. However, the integration of traditional matrimonial rituals in the profession rites do not necessarily lead to a proper understanding of religious women as married persons, because even after the performance of these rituals, ordinary people still refer to them as unmarried.

An overview of the findings clearly indicates that much effort is indeed being put towards making religious life feel at home in the Kenyan local context through the inculturation of various aspects of religious life. In particular, the bridal imagery appears to be the most inculturated aspect of religious life. This is indicated by the elaborate marriage rituals in the profession rites. The rest are aspects of religious life that are seen as being practiced in a particular African way. The study has further established that the inculturated bridal metaphor appear to work well with the individual religious women, both in terms of their experience of a spousal relationship to Christ and in their sense of that relationship empowering them for ministry. However, despite this explicit and public portrayal of profession as marriage, the findings indicate that sisters are still perceived by many ordinary people as unmarried and barren and as people who have escaped from greater responsibility of physical motherhood as these participants observed:

“They think we are barren, that is why we joined religious life and we are unmarried.”

“...she is unmarried, she doesn’t want to give birth and maybe she has a problem she cannot be able to give birth.”

“They don’t understand and even men can disturb you even after seeing what has been done [*gūtīnia kīānde*]. Because they simply know the man you have married is not visible. So they become a problem and even when they attend your profession ceremony they also come to you and tell you it cannot be.”

“I would say they [religious women] try to live [their vows] although not understood well by outsiders, but the way we live it, because we are the ones living the life, we are the ones who have chosen, we really live the vows of course, but then it is not really visible to the people outside because they still think we have or we live with some men in the communities, until there was a case where somebody kept on checking because he could only see Father [priest] coming from the convent in the morning and did not know when father entered, until one day he woke up very early and hid, and saw the Father now coming for mass. You find they still think we cannot live alone.”

Thus the findings from the interview study support the hypothesis that despite the integration of the matrimonial rituals in the consecration rites, the ordinary people continue to regard sisters as unmarried persons while most of the sisters regard themselves as married to Christ. This misunderstanding could be explained in different ways. First, it could be because most people understand the marriage metaphor in a literal way. As one of the participants commented, “From the African point of view, there is no marriage with no children and this complicates it, if viewed in the human level, since in my marriage this is in the spiritual level.” The religious women too may be failing to present themselves as married women as one participant noted; “it goes along with how one presents herself. If I present myself the way a married woman is presenting herself in the sense of responsibility, not just the ring, they will say this is a married woman and the way she keeps herself, she is really a married woman. So more [than] with the physical marriage, it goes more with the service.” Second, this misunderstanding could be attributed to the use of the European dress (habit) among the African religious women. The European dress alienates the sisters from their people. Thus the removal of the traditional dress after the profession rituals and the return to the European dress (habit) seem to make the ordinary people forget the connection between the portrayal of sisters as married women in the profession ritual and their subsequent appearance in European dress. Third, this misunderstanding could be attributed to the high standard of living among the religious women. The missionaries presented a religious life that was of high standard. The local religious women embraced it and continued to live above the living standards of their people. They are in a class higher than the people they serve. Having not to struggle economically to survive, like their local people, means the ordinary people do not

associate their profession with marriage, in which married women struggle hard to keep their families going. Fourth, this misunderstanding could be attributed to the context of an African yearning for fruitfulness where the procreative emphasis in marriage pervades the whole society. As pointed out by the participants, “from the African point of view, there is no marriage with no children and this will complicate it if viewed in the human level since in marriage this is on spiritual level.” In such a context where children are highly valued and also perceived as giving their parents a right to the ancestral world, religious life seems to have no meaning. This explains how difficult it is for people to fully accept and embrace a life that has been transplanted onto them from outside. After almost one hundred years of its presence in sub-Saharan Africa, religious life appears not to have taken deep roots among the people of Kenya. The continued effort of inculturation by the Kenyan religious women can be seen as a quest to seeking to understand themselves as Africans as they live religious life as well as an effort to make religious life comprehensible to their people. Perhaps by delving deeper into the traditional rituals integrated by the religious women into their rites of profession, this study could help make more comprehensible the meaning of the inculturated bridal imagery as regards the religious women in Kenya, hence rectifying the notion that religious women have escaped the greater responsibility of physical motherhood and so have wasted their lives or are barren. Before delving deeper into the rituals, it is important to recall Komonchak’s definition of ritual. In his words, “Ritual can be understood as a social, symbolic process which has the potential for communicating, creating, criticizing and even transforming meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Ritual can be understood in several aspects: First, ritual is a social process since it is a product of society. Second, ritual arises out of a specific need, for example, the need for structure or social order, the need to bond humanity and the need to resolve a crisis. Third, ritual is symbolic since its basic units comprise a series of symbols such as an object, activity, relationship, word, gesture or spatial arrangement serving as units of ritual. Fourth, ritual establishes and enhances relationships which increase bonds through given beliefs and values. Fifth, ritual serves as an occasion for making critical reflection on the relevant beliefs and values. Sixth, ritual helps in the creation and transformation of identity.<sup>2</sup> From the above mentioned aspects it is clear that rituals are multipurpose. Our discussion below shows how rituals help in creation and transformation of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Komonchak, “Ritual”, *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 907.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 906-907.



## Inculturation of Religious Life: The Marital Imagery

Traditionally, the ritual of *gũtinia kãnde* was performed after a woman had been married for a considerable period of time and having remained in her husband's homestead providing physical and reproductive labour. In addition, the ritual of *gũtinia kãnde* was accompanied by the payment of the bride price (*rũracio*), which was an ongoing practice. For the religious women (interviewees), this ceremony takes place after they have spent a considerable period of time, usually six to nine years in their congregations as temporary professed members. As such, they (religious women) having remained in this marriage (religious life) as temporary professed, makes it clear to their congregations, but not to the outside community, that they have made a significant experience which is sufficient for bride price (*rũracio*) payment, which comes with the ritual ceremony of *gũtinia kãnde*. In this case, their experience (physical and reproductive labour) is measured in terms of prayers, commitment, service, community life, which makes them presentable to their husband, Christ (their congregation), to be married permanently. When the congregation accepts the sisters to make their final profession after having ascertained their spiritual growth,<sup>3</sup> the congregation says that they are worthy spouses to be married to Christ. From then on they get a new status—they become permanently married. By cutting the shoulder blade meat (*gũtinia kãnde*) for the sisters, they, like the traditional woman are cut off from their biological families and united to the congregation to which they are now definitively married. They become permanently married and also become elders. In the ritual of *gũtinia kãnde* they can now eat the ribs, first as a sign that they have found their husband (Christ) in the name of their congregations. Second, they have become elders and married women; ribs are for elders and married women. Further, through the sharing of the ribs with the officiating bishop, who in this case represents Christ (the church), the sisters become fully immersed into their congregations. Henceforth, they are now allowed to eat things that they could not eat formally—the new responsibilities. They are now to share duties and responsibilities with the congregation for the whole of their life. By making the final profession, they are considered permanent members of the congregation, that family and clan of faith, just like the traditional woman for whom the ritual of *gũtinia kãnde* has been performed, making her a permanent member of the family and the clan of her husband.

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<sup>3</sup>As noted earlier, temporarily professed sisters are evaluated by the congregation to ascertain their spiritual growth. The evaluations usually centre on prayer life, community living, understanding of vows and apostolic works.

In the Agĩkũyũ tradition, when a woman reached a certain level in her life where bride price was paid and the subsequent ritual of *gĩtinia kĩande* performed, it meant that she had fully accepted the husband and his clan and was never thought to leave her marriage and the clan. She was considered a mature person who had made her decision consciously, willingly, and knowingly. The ritual of *gĩtinia kĩande* involves slaughtering, which is pouring of blood or sacrifice (*igongona*). In the Agĩkũyũ tradition, any occasion that is marked by pouring of blood is equivalent to sacrifice (*igongona*) and that particular occasion is regarded as sacred, set apart, consecrated, and hence, not something to play or joke around with. The bond emanating from such sacrifice (*igongona*) cannot be broken. It is binding. The traditional woman takes part in the sacrifice (*igongona*) by eating the meat (shoulder blade meat). The marriage is thus sealed and is permanent. Once the ritual of *gĩtinia kĩande* is performed, she cannot leave that marriage and she cannot be chased away whatsoever. If she does, she risks death, for it was a taboo to leave one's marriage in the Agĩkũyũ tradition. By undergoing this ritual, the sisters also are bound by the sacrifice (*igongona*) to the congregation. By eating the shoulder blade meat, the sisters affirm that they will remain with their marriage and work for the good of God's family—the people of God, in order to give them a divine unending life, just like the traditional married woman catered to the total well-being of her family and the clan.

#### Religious Women's Identification with the "Bride of Christ" Metaphor

The findings indicate that the religious women in Kenya are comfortable with and identify themselves with the bridal imagery. They also find it as being operative in their lives by means of empowering them in their lives and ministries. With regard to the question on suggesting a different model, it is worth highlighting and discussing the model of "being Co-creators" as suggested by one of the interviewees and one that the researcher had anticipated. Perhaps it could further help clear up the misunderstanding that most Kenyans have of religious life. The model of "being Co-creator" is derived from the Agĩkũyũ myth of origin which centres on Gĩkũyũ [father] and Mũmbi [mother] of the Agĩkũyũ ethnic community, and their nine (ten)<sup>4</sup> daughters from whom all Agĩkũyũ clans are descended and whom they

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<sup>4</sup>In the Agĩkũyũ community it is a taboo to count children because they believe counting would put a border to the limits of blessings. Hence nine is that perfect number that is equal to ten. The names of the ten daughters include: Wanjiku, Wanjiru, Wambui, Wangui, Wachera, Waithera, Wangarĩ, Wangeci, Wairimu and Wamuyu.

are accordingly named.<sup>5</sup> Mũmbi, the foremother of the Agĩkũyũ ethnic community means the “moulder” or “co-creator.” According to the legend, the nine (ten) daughters upon reaching maturity were married to the ten young men who appeared after Gĩkũyũ [father] and Mũmbi [mother] prayed and sacrificed to *Mogai* the [Divider of the universe—God] and asked *Mogai* to give them sons to marry their daughters. Gĩkũyũ [father] gave them land and each daughter set up her own house (*nyũmba* or sub-clan) and began to propagate for her clan. The nine (ten) daughters were joined together under the name of *Mbarĩ ya Mũmbi* (Mũmbi’s

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<sup>5</sup>The interpretation of the model of Co-creator or moulders is the author’s own suggestion and she has not discussed it with other religious women. In the life-cycle of the religious women, this model would fit in the stage of final profession; when the religious women vow to permanently commit themselves to God for the service. The integration of the Agĩkũyũ creation myth into religious life cannot be perceived as a threat to Catholic orthodoxy. This is a question of inculturation. The church that has no space for inculturation when at the same time it would want to evangelize to the world is a self-contradicting and self-defeating church. For instance, the Gospel of Luke chapter 10 on the sending of the seventy two disciples, Jesus tells them to “enter the house, say peace be with you...eat and drink what they offer you [...]” These were Jews being sent to non-Jews. Food is a determinant factor for a Jew. Food is life. Food and culture are two different sides of a coin. If Jesus was not afraid of letting his disciples take in the foods and drinks of the people they were going to, he meant that they were to accept to embrace what the cultures they were to evangelize would give them. Inculturation is not a threat to the church. The epitome, acme, apogee, summit of inculturation is incarnation. God decided to take on human state, body, culture, civilization, time, food in Jesus Christ. That is the pertinent question of inculturation. What we (Africans) received was Christianity vested in Western dress and civilization. For the Jews to be able to live in the Promised Land, there this would have involved adaptation and inculturation so that they could adapt themselves in the new land and the same time keep their identity. If Christianity has Jewish origins because Jesus was a Jew, Greek culture was used to adapt the orthodox Christianity as Roman culture was used to define Roman Catholic Christianity. With this in mind we may ask, “How would the Agĩkũyũ culture threaten Christianity and it is a culture that has carried the Agĩkũyũ fore-fathers and fore-mothers from before birth to the life after?” Any culture of a people capable of carrying people from life after birth to life after death is a sacred culture. Just as God accepted incarnation through a Jewish culture in Jesus, was Hellenised by Greeks in orthodox Christianity and Romanized by the Catholic Christianity, he accepts incarnation in each culture including the Agĩkũyũ culture. The Agĩkũyũ are a people who believed in the all-powerful God (Ngai) like the Israelites did. How then is Jesus to have a place among the Agĩkũyũ? I would say, the same way he found among the Jews. The Agĩkũyũ basic family was that of 12 (2 parents) and (10) daughters; Gĩkũyũ and Mũmbi and 10 daughters. Just like the Israelites are marked by the 12 tribes, the Agĩkũyũ are marked by 9 (10) clans (perfect nine clans) which is equal to 10 clans. (Agĩkũyũ do not mention number ten. The number nine is therefore referred to as perfect nine). One cannot talk of the Agĩkũyũ without making reference to the (10) clans. One is born Gĩkũyũ of such and such clan (*mũhĩrĩga*) just like the Israelites were born of the tribes of Benjamin, Manasseh, Judah, etc. As such, no Christianity can take root in the Agĩkũyũ if it does not respect this clan structure. The clan is the repository of the highest values among the Agĩkũyũ.

family group), in honour of their mother Mũmbi.<sup>6</sup> In respect to this legend, the model of “Co-creator” may be beneficial to religious women in Kenya. The Agĩkũyũ myth is well known in Kenya and would be well-received by the sisters. Just like Mũmbi [moulder or co-creator] propagated a whole clan through her nine (ten) daughters, religious women can likewise be understood as “co-creators” or “moulders”, by virtue of their life- enhancing ministries. Further, just as each of the nine (ten) daughters set up her own house (*nyũmba* or sub-clan) and continued with the propagation of the clan, religious women may further be understood as “daughters of Mũmbi” in that they have left their natal clans too to set up each a house (*nyũmba*) in the church. Like the other women in Kenya who bring forth life in their physical motherhood, religious women too, being the custodians of the homeless, orphans, care-takers of the sick, share in this mystery of creation with Mogai (the divider of the universe, God). They are Co-creators and moulders by virtue of their life enhancing ministries. This concept of traditional marriage which places high value on procreation is vital in understanding religious life. Just as marriage gives life, religious women similarly offer their lives through their different ministries in order to foster life.

These findings appear consistent with other works on inculturation of religious life. It has been observed by Vicente Kiaziku that “there is no religious institute in Africa which does not feel the need for the inculturation of religious life, and is not considering how to bring it about.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Francois Kabasele Lumamba posits in his study that the consecration of a religious is one of the most inculturated African rites.<sup>8</sup> The results from the present study are in agreement with the above statements. Religious women in Kenya are making efforts to inculturate various aspects of religious life. The consecration aspect of religious life appeared to be the most inculturated aspect in the present study. This is probably because of the need to make the religious life feel at home in every people’s culture and to foster deep understanding among the people. This success too can be attributed to the fact that the two congregations under study are of indigenous nature and as such they have derived their African identity from their involvement in their ministries that have originated from a local context and are open to the wellsprings of ATRs.<sup>9</sup> This has made it possible for them to appropriate various symbols and rituals from their various cultures into religious life.

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<sup>6</sup>Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 6.

<sup>7</sup>Kiaziku, *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa*, 22.

<sup>8</sup>Lumbala, *Celebrating Jesus Christ*, 97.

<sup>9</sup>Martin O’Reilly, “African Independent Churches and Religious Life,” *African Ecclesial Review* 35 (1993): 218.

More importantly, despite the drawback of the bridal metaphor on part of the ordinary people, the findings, particularly on the inculturation, indicate a quest by the Kenyan religious women to create an African religious life. “How long will religious life in Africa continue to follow the Western model?”<sup>10</sup> was a pertinent question posed by Gloria Kenyuyfoon to the religious women in Africa. Kenyuyfoon laments that African religious women suffer from a form of dualistic situation where they find themselves caught between being African women and being religious. Religious life, she says, rather than putting them in a renewed way into their culture with the mission of transforming and uplifting it, alienates them from this reality and from their people.<sup>11</sup> The findings indicate a great effort by the Kenyan religious women to identify with their people in their cultural contexts. For instance, when asked about the possibility of fully inculturating religious life to a point of understanding it as “African Religious Life” instead of “Religious life in Africa”, most of the interviewees felt strongly that it is possible and some even felt that they are there already. As two of the respondents observed:

1. Yes. There will be such a time because the way you see the Western side, vocations are dying, many people are looking at Africa, what can the African religious do? So I see that there will be a time when it will change, like we will take the vows according to how we will understand them as Africans, not borrowing from the other side. We will be able to live our community life as Africans not borrowing from others. This time is coming very soon for sure.
2. There is a possibility of reaching that time of appreciating ourselves as Africans if we can learn to sustain ourselves, not to depend so much on what the whites are bringing or they are controlling us and we can do this by embracing our values and going back to the roots. I believe it will enable us to find ground. We are all growing and we can find grounds to define religious life to us as Africans. Well, we borrowed from the white people but we can still define it as African, by celebrating it as African and appreciate one another despite the differences. I hope that one day we will reach there.

These findings also support the framework of the study. As noted with respect to the theoretical framework, the project of colonialism violently destroyed many African cultures and created “a cultural vacuum that was to be filled with European cultures.”<sup>12</sup> This attitude was further reinforced by some missionaries who interpreted traditional manner of living as “paganism, as an evil life, and a disinheritance.”<sup>13</sup> In response, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall*

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<sup>10</sup>Kenyuyfoon, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization*, 6.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. 6.

<sup>12</sup>Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 17-18.

<sup>13</sup>Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes*, 90.

*Apart*, a postcolonial novel, sought to prove to his fellow African people that was nothing inherently shameful in African culture and traditions, as was being depicted by the colonizer. The results of this study have shown an increased use of different aspects of ATR in religious celebrations, an indication that being wholly African and an authentically consecrated women are compatible. Religious women do not need to be alienated from their cultures in order to embrace religious life. The findings further indicate a great quest by Kenyan religious women to identify themselves with their local cultures. As one participant noted, “I admire when we the local congregations we are striving to be African, and I know we will one day live as Africans not borrowing from whites, that we will live religious life and practice it as Africans, and bring our African values in the community.” The same sentiment is echoed by another participant: “Inculturation is very important because it will help religious people to be true to themselves other than living what is imposed to them by the whites. They are helped by that African culture being practiced in the religious life. As an African I offer myself as I am—I am not somebody different and encountering God as an African I want to celebrate him as an African.”

Religious Studies scholar Elizabeth Ursic’s observation that “rights require rites”<sup>14</sup>,<sup>15</sup> is an excellent tool to examine this great zeal of the African sisters to identify themselves as Africans, especially by the use of the matrimonial rituals. We would say that the religious women in Kenya have the right of being referred to as married women and as mothers in the light of their life enhancing ministries, but still they are viewed by many ordinary people as barren and unmarried, and as women who have escaped the greater responsibility of motherhood. In order to counter this attitude, and capture their rightful status as married women and as life givers, religious women employ ritual as tool to explain themselves. Being married to Christ for them is significant in their ministries. The use of the rituals thus give them energy and momentum in their ministries. In the absence of the rituals religious women would not be able to advance their status as married women and as mothers.

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<sup>14</sup>Elizabeth Ursic, *Women, Ritual, and Power: Placing Female Imagery of God in Christian worship* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 60.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps religious congregations in Kenya should consider the possibility of a having a formal rite or an indigenous rite which will be in harmony with African mentality. This can be an important opening towards an authentic African religious life.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has investigated the inculturation of religious life among Kenyan religious women. Specifically, it has described the inculturation of rites of profession, the use of the bridal metaphor among the Kenya religious women, and the perception of religious life by the ordinary people. There are three major findings. The first is that traditional matrimonial rituals are integrated into the profession rite in order to foster a deeper understanding of the concepts that define consecrated life, of which the majority of ordinary Kenyans have little understanding. However, this integration does not lead to an understanding of consecrated women as married persons, for the majority of people continue to refer to them as unmarried and barren, people who have escaped from the greater responsibility. The second finding is that Kenyan religious women are contented with the use of the bridal metaphor and they find it empowering them in their lives and ministries, despite its drawback with respect to non-religious people. The third finding is that majority of ordinary Kenyans have little understanding of what consecrated life entails.

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that the most inculturated aspect of religious life and the only ritualized aspect of it is the rite of religious profession, referred to in this study as the bridal metaphor. Further, the study has established that the bridal metaphor seems to work well or be understood by individual sisters, as opposed to the ordinary people. The reason for this observation is that most religious women in Kenya seem to have maintained a distance from the ordinary people due to their use of European dress (habit). Thus when the sisters take off the traditional dress after their final profession rituals and go back the European dress (habit), the ordinary people seem to lose the connection between the portrayal of sisters as African married women and their subsequent look in European dress. Another factor is that the ordinary people perceive the bridal metaphor in a literal sense. Most African people still hold the traditional cultural view that no marriage is fully complete without children. As such they seem not to understand the spiritual marriage of the sisters, which has no physical children. Another factor is that the religious women see themselves as expressing traditional ATR values such as communal living, welcoming, sharing, evangelical counsels such as poverty, chastity and obedience, reconciliation, and so on in many ways, that are not ritualized and thus telegraphed to the outsiders. The misunderstanding and the drawback of the marriage metaphor among the non-religious people has also been attributed to the economic lifestyle among the religious women, which

goes beyond that of their people and an African value system that yearns for fruitfulness, on which much emphasis is placed on procreation.

The study has also found that there exists a misunderstanding of religious life among the ordinary Kenyans. This study has embarked on resolving some of the misunderstanding through a deeper interpretation of the rituals. For instance, the ritual of *gũtinia kĩande* has demonstrated that religious women too are life givers and have not escaped from greater responsibility as perceived by many. Based on the evidence presented by the study findings, it can be concluded that the spirituality of women who understand their own vocation in bridal terms is important. Even though the term bride of Christ is not particularly meaningful in some religious congregations mainly in the Europe and North America, it holds great significance among indigenous congregations in Kenya. This is because, through the rites of inculturation of the religious profession ceremony, religious women consider themselves as rightfully married and as such believe they should be viewed as *Nyakĩnyua*. In the next section I will make some recommendations as to how this can be encouraged or achieved.

This research contributes to the study of the inculturation of religious life in general and in particular to the understanding of the inculturation of religious life in Kenya. This research further brings some insights into the way that the integration of African traditional values associated with marriage into religious rites can enhance religious life in Kenya. For instance, the sad reality of tribal animosity present in religious communities can be addressed if religious communities in Kenya could embrace values of traditional marriage and therefore consider their religious commitment as a form of traditional marriage. African religious women come from backgrounds that are sensitive to tribal affiliations where conflict between two people can involve a whole community. Traditional marriage enhanced inter-community relations, for in marriage the communities involved shared their very existence and in reality they became one people.<sup>1</sup> Likewise when religious women are understood as married women, they can be instruments of peaceful co-existence in their congregations and to the wider society. Further, the insights brought out by this research on traditional marriage values could be helpful in strengthening the lapses that are visible in the institution of marriage among the Kenyan community. For instance the progressive stages in the traditional marriage could be used to enhance the African Christian marriage in Kenya.

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<sup>1</sup>Magesa, *African Religion*, 115.



## Recommendations

In the light of the findings of this study a few recommendations seem appropriate at this point. It is also necessary to underline that I am making these recommendations from the standpoint of my personal situatedness as an African sister in an indigenous congregation.

First, African religious women particularly Kenyan local congregations, should do away with the present European dress (habit), which alienates them from their people, and adapt an African dress commonly known as (*Kitenge*). The veil (head tie) should be replaced with a piece of *Kitenge*, which should be tied in a similar manner to that of African women. Adapting to African *Kitenge* will not only bring sisters closer to ordinary people and help them view religious women as African married women, it will also help ordinary people to understand sisters even without the European dress.

Second, in addition to the bridal metaphor which is explicitly and publicly inculturated and ritualized, Kenyan local congregations should put effort into inculturating and ritualizing other aspects of religious life such as the congregation's charism, evangelical counsels (poverty and obedience), community life, prayers, leadership in the congregation, etc. so that they may be comprehensible to ordinary people. This deep and more publicly displayed inculturation could help to address the challenges noted by the religious women which are mostly the outcomes of colonization and globalism.

Third, together with being regarded as *Nyakinyua* (married women), the study recommends that religious women be understood too as Co-creators or moulders. By virtue of their life-enhancing ministries, they too are mothers and as such qualify to be ancestors.

Fourth, to make religious life more comprehensible to ordinary people, the study recommends that the Catholic Church in Kenya make some adjustments in the liturgy (mass) during profession days. To begin with, the profession days of first or final profession in many congregations usually take place on the days of Solemnities in the church's calendar and so the theme (homily) most preached during that day concerns the Feast of the Solemnity and less is said about key aspects of religious life. The occasion should be taken to teach people about religious life rather than preaching much about the Feast or the Solemnity, alternatively, the profession days should be scheduled in the ordinary days of the church's calendar. Also, normally, it is the priest or the bishop who gives the homily during the profession days; some adjustments could be made so that the Superior General or any other delegated sister can give the homily as she teaches the people and explains most preferably in an African traditional way the concepts that make up religious life. Although during the profession there is a sister who is delegated to take people through the day's program, she

does this before the ceremony begins and says less about religious life. She focuses much more on general arrangements and the histories of the sisters professing. Thus, adjustments should be made to allow the delegated sister to explain to the attendee during mass time.

Fifth, to make religious life more comprehensible and to fully identify with the people that they serve, religious women should avoid living beyond the standards of their people and perhaps heed Bujo's call for African orders: "To make the aim of their apostolates as one of developing the villages and making them more habitable by helping construct healthier and more comfortable houses for the peasants. Further, to help the people living in slums on matters of hygiene, clean water and healthy diet."<sup>2</sup> This I think will make religious women question their high standard of living that alienates them from the people they serve.<sup>3</sup>

### Suggestions for Further Research

It was my hope that through a deep and thorough interpretation of traditional matrimonial rituals, consecrated life would be more understood as a form of marriage in the Kenyan context. As the findings have indicated, religious women in Kenya embrace the bridal imagery and find it empowering in their lives and ministries. This is contrary to most of the Western congregations where the bridal metaphor has almost gone out of use. It was observed that feminism was one of the major reasons for this disparity in the use of the term. Whereas feminism is widely spread in Europe and North America, it has not been so in Africa. I would therefore like to expand this project by investigating whether Kenyan religious women would still identify with the bridal metaphor, if they were fully aware of the feminist discourse. As we saw in chapter two, the bride of Christ metaphor is a male concept of female spirituality that was designed by the early church fathers to subjugate and control women. I would like to learn, in this light, whether religious women in Kenya would still embrace the bridal metaphor or would they reject it. This study further points to an immense need to pursue a number of other topics that could help enhance religious life in Kenya. Such topics as the theme of religious dress (habit) which is an important aspect of religious life as far as African religious women are concerned was raised in the study, but was not expounded. Since I pointed out religious habit as one of the factors leading to the alienation

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<sup>2</sup>Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 108.

<sup>3</sup> Inculturation is significant for it generally enables the Church to highlight social-cultural aspects that are not opposed to the Christian faith and separate them from the ones that are contrary to the faith. In this case, if the local culture shifts to accept the single life, and starts to put less pressure in women to marry and reproduce, then one of the inculturation's goals should be to effect such change.

of religious sisters from ordinary people, this could be further examined to explore how ordinary people would react to African religious women adapting to an African *Kitenge* or lay woman's clothes. Would the change in the habit enhance ordinary people's understanding of consecrated life or would it hinder such understanding? Would religious women themselves embrace the change to an African *Kitenge*? I hypothesize that both the ordinary people and the religious women would embrace the change.

To continue the broader purpose of this study one could delve deeper into the issue of ethnicity in community living among religious women and its impact on religious life in Kenya. As we saw in Chapter Five, community living was an aspect of religious life that most sisters mentioned to have modelled with ATR community living. Yet it was still pointed out that community living as lived by the religious women was artificial while in ATR it was spontaneous. Perhaps a study on ethnicity in community living among religious women in Kenya could unearth the root problem and give some possible remedies. I feel that a deeper inculturation of community life would help address the issue of ethnicity in community living. I would suggest that community living be made a vow. Perhaps this too would help address the issue of ethnicity in community living.

Having looked at the inculturation of religious life as practiced by religious women in Kenya, perhaps further research could be carried out to establish how African religious men are inculturating religious life in their communities. Would there be any congruence with how religious women have approached the task of inculturation?

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## Appendices

### Appendix A.

#### Interview Consent Form

“*Wamwarĩ* or *Nyakĩnyua*?” Understanding Consecrated Life as African Marriage in the Light of Inculturation

Researcher: Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro, Graduate Student, University of Saskatchewan, Graduate Studies and Research, (Department of Linguistic and Religious Studies) 306-713 8310; (jwk265@mail.usask.ca)

Supervisor: Professor Mary Ann Beavis, Department of Religion and Culture, St. Thomas More College, 1437 College Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0W6 Canada. (306) 966 8933, mbeavis@stmcollege.ca

I have received an invitation communicating the purpose and process of this study and have been asked to participate in an in-person interview. I understand that purpose of the interview is to enable the completion of a Master’s Thesis.

The interviews will focus on people’s perception of Consecrated Life, particularly the use of the bridal metaphor among African sisters and the extent to which traditional marriage rituals are being integrated into profession rites. The purpose of the research is to determine how different people in Kenya perceive consecrated life and the status they accord to consecrated women. Most importantly, the study seeks to assess the use of the bridal metaphor among African sisters and the extent to which religious life is being inculturated in Kenya. It is hoped that the results of this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of consecrated life with regard to its relevance to the Kenyan context and the wider church.

The interviews will take a minimum of one hour. The recording device may be turned off at any time. The participant will be provided with opportunity to review their transcript. This will be done through the e-mail.

The identities of the participants to be interviewed will be kept confidential. Personal information, such as address or telephone numbers of the participants will not be shared with others. Further, any information collected will be kept in the strictest confidence and anonymity. Any personal information happened upon any time during the project such as mailing address or telephone number will be kept safe by the researcher named in this consent form and her research assistant. The research supervisor will keep the data obtained for a minimum of 5 years, and if the data are destroyed after 5 years, they will be destroyed beyond recovery. A master list that links participants to their data/responses will be kept during this period, and it will be destroyed at the same time as the other data. Participants may withdraw their data at any time prior to the destruction of these data. Once the data is pooled or de-identified after 5 years it will not be possible to withdraw the data. The participants are also free not to answer any question that they feel uncomfortable. Further, the participants will have an option to use their names or pseudonyms during the interviews. This project has been reviewed and approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Ethics Board, BEH# 15-148. I understand that I can find out more

about my rights to participate in this study by calling the Office of Research Services at the University of Saskatchewan at (306), 966-2084.

I read and explained this consent form to the participants before receiving the participants consent, and the participants had knowledge of its content and appeared to understand it.

At this time, I consent to be interviewed about the matters described above.

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Name of Participant

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Researcher's signature

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Date

## Appendix B.

### Letter Requesting Permission from the Superior General

Researcher: Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro, Graduate Student, University of Saskatchewan,  
Graduate Studies and Research, (Department of Linguistics and Religious Studies) 306-715-  
0352; (jwk265@mail.com)  
Supervisor: Professor Mary Ann Beavis.

Dear Rev. Mother \_\_\_\_\_

Greetings and May Jesus be Praised.

My name is Sister Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro, a sister of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi. I am a master's student in the Department of Religion and Culture at the University of Saskatchewan. I am conducting a research on the Inculturation of religious life in Kenya. This is to help me write my thesis. The topic of the research is "*Wamwarĩ* or *Nyakĩnyua*?" Understanding Consecrated Life as African marriage in the Light of Inculturation". The aim of this letter is to request your permission and consent as the Superior General of the congregation of \_\_\_\_\_ to allow me to interview the sisters from your congregation who are finally professed and have undergone the traditional marriage rituals and have understanding of the same. If you grant me permission, I will be able to access the list of the finally professed sisters, contact them privately, and ask for their consent in participating in the study.

This study will be significant, as it will help us find out ways on how to better inculturate religious life in Kenya hence making it more relevant, rooted and grounded in the African values. Further, the findings are also hoped to help the African sisters to think about the use of the bridal metaphor.

I would also like to inform you that any information obtained in connection with this research that can be identified with your congregation would be kept in confidence and will only be disclosed with your permission. More importantly, I would like you to know that your decision on whether or not to include your congregation in this research will not affect my future relationship with you whatsoever.

If you have any questions, I will be most happy to answer them. Thank you for your cooperation.

Yours Faithfully,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro.

## Appendix C.

### Letter to Prospective Participants.

Researcher: Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro, Graduate Student, University of Saskatchewan,  
Graduate Studies and Research, (Department of Linguistics and Religious Studies) 306-713-  
8310; (jwk265@mail.ca) (jemigithiga@gmail.com)  
Supervisor: Professor Mary Ann Beavis.

Dear sister\_\_\_\_\_

I am Sister Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro, a sister of the Assumption sisters of Nairobi. I am currently a master's student in the Department of Religion and Culture at the University of Saskatchewan. I am conducting a research on the inculturation of religious life in Kenya, which will help me write my thesis. The title of the thesis is "*Wamwarĩ or Nyakĩnyua?*" Understanding consecrated Life as African marriage in the Light of Inculturation".

It is my pleasure to invite you as a potential participant in this study because you are a Kenyan, you belong to an indigenous or local congregation, you have made your final profession, and you have undergone and you are aware of the traditional African marriage rituals.

I am hoping that together we shall learn the best way to inculturate religious life in Kenya in order to make it relevant, rooted and grounded in our local customs. If you decide to participate in this study, please sign the consent statement below.

I am assuring you that any information obtained in this research that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission. Further, note that you have the freedom to refuse participation in this survey at any stage of the study without penalty.

If you have any question, please ask. I will be happy to answer them. Thank you for your cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

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Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro

## Appendix D.

### Interview Guide

“*Wamwarĩ* or *Nyakĩnyua*?” Understanding Consecrated Life as African Marriage in the Light of Inculturation

Researcher: Jemima Wanjiku Kiboro, Graduate Student, University of Saskatchewan, Graduate Studies and Research, (Department of Linguistics and Religious Studies) 306-715-0352; ([jwk265@mail.com](mailto:jwk265@mail.com)) ([jemigithiga@gmail.com](mailto:jemigithiga@gmail.com))

Supervisor: Professor Mary Ann Beavis, Department of Religion and Culture, St. Thomas More College, 1437 College Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7J 4H7, (306) 966 8933, [mbeavis@stmcollege.ca](mailto:mbeavis@stmcollege.ca).

#### Opening Phase:

The aim of the opening remarks is to inform the participant about his or her role in the study and to ask some general questions:

Welcome and thank you for agreeing to have a conversation with me. I value what you have to say and I strongly believe that your experience has something very valuable to teach others and me. I feel most honoured that you are willing to participate in this study. It is very generous of you to give your time and self for the purpose of this study. I want you to know that I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. This research focuses on the inculturation of religious life in Kenya. In particular, I am examining the extent in which aspects of traditional African marriage rites and African values are being integrated in the consecration rites. Further, the study also seeks to assess the use of the bridal metaphor among the African sisters. It could be great if you could share your personal experiences as a consecrated person with me. While this is important, I am also interested in your story of life in general. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself?

#### Biographical information

It is not the aim of this section to collect specific personal data on the participants but rather to know the family background, social, religious, and cultural influence on the participant. More importantly, this section aims at helping break the ice between the interviewer and the interviewee.<sup>1</sup> Not all questions listed in this section will be asked.

1. Where were you born?
2. What is the name of your congregation?
3. When did you join religious life?
4. How old were you when you entered religious life?
5. When did you make your final profession?
6. How old were you when you made your first and final profession?
7. How did you choose the congregation you entered?
8. Do you hold any leadership position in your congregation?
9. What is your profession?
10. What level of education were you when you joined religious life?
11. What is the highest education level you have achieved?

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<sup>1</sup> The questions are adapted from Robert Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview* (Sage Publications, Inc. 1998), 43-53

12. Where are you working currently?

The Experience of Participants on the Research Topic.

This section will discuss the experiences of the consecrated persons on the inculturation of religious life in Kenya, their experiences on the perceptions of ordinary people, and their views on the bridal metaphor. The participants will be encouraged to share their experiences.

1. What was your image of a nun before you entered the congregation?
2. What does it mean to be a consecrated woman in Kenya today? What are the challenges?
3. What do you understand by the term inculturation?
4. What is the significance of inculturation to religious life?
5. What aspects of ATR (African traditional religion/culture) have you seen been integrated into the consecration rites/professions in your congregation? (during and post profession)
6. Would you say that the local congregations in Kenya reflect an African identity in the way they live? In the community, observance of the vows and in their ministries?
7. What are some of the traditional African values have you seen been practiced by the local congregations in Kenya?
8. Do you consider yourself as married to Christ?
9. What does being married to Christ mean to you?
10. Do you experience the status of being a bride of Christ as empowering to your life and ministry?
11. If asked to suggest a different model from the 'bride of Christ' what would you suggest?
12. What are your experiences with the ordinary people in the church and in the society?
13. What status do the ordinary people accord to you a religious woman? Do they see you as married to Christ or as unmarried?
14. What would you say that people appreciate most in the religious women in Kenya?
15. Do you feel honoured, recognised, and celebrated in the society?

Closure Questions

This section the participant is give opportunity to add some final thoughts to what has been said.

1. Is there anything else that you would like to include that I did not ask you?
2. What are your feelings about this interview and all that we have covered?
3. Will there be a time when we as Africans will be talking of African Religious Life instead of Religious Life in Africa?